

# **Baptistic Theologies**

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# IBTSCENTRE

AMSTERDAM

2015 Nordenhaug Lectures

VU Amsterdam on Monday 2nd November 2015

Delivered by Dr David P. Gushee

Distinguished University Professor of Christian Ethics, Director of the Center for Theology and Public Life Mercer University, Atlanta & Macon, Georgia. Widely regarded as one of the leading moral voices in American Christianity, he is the author or editor of 20 books and hundreds of articles in his field, including *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, *Kingdom Ethics*, *The Sacredness of Human Life*. He will deliver three lectures on the Monday on the theme of 'What it means to say that human life is sacred'

What it means to say that  
human life is sacred...

1. Sacredness and Christian Scripture
2. Sacredness and Christian tradition
3. Sacredness and contemporary application



The lectures will be followed by an IBTSC Conference on 'Conflicting Convictions' on Tuesday 3rd and Wednesday 4th of November in Baptist House Amsterdam. This conference will explore disagreements among Christians on 'matters that matter' and responses to such.

Call for papers from biblical, historical, theological, and practical perspectives until Monday 15 June 2015. Possibility of publication in IBTSC Journal. Contact Stuart Blythe, for further details [blythe@ibts.eu](mailto:blythe@ibts.eu)

While there is no charge for the lectures or conference those attending and participating in the conference will be required to meet own travel, accommodation, and subsistence costs in Amsterdam.

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## Editorial

Readers of our journal have noticed that this volume is coming with a significant delay. The Editorial Board of *Baptistic Theologies* offers sincere apologies for the inconveniences caused by the postponement. It was largely due to the relocation of IBTS to Amsterdam. In its journey over the years Baptist Theological Seminary, now the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, moved from Rüschlikon in the vicinity of Zürich, where the earliest Anabaptist communities were gathering, through Prague, where the earliest Reformers led by Jan Hus and Petr Chelčický were trying to reform the Catholic church from within, to the town which offered hospitality and welcome to the British dissenters to form the earliest Baptist community. Led by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys they gathered for worship in 1609 in part of the East India Bakehouse, in Bakkerstraat, a building owned by a Mennonite Jan Munter. The original bakery was probably located behind the present-day Amstel Street 120 in Amsterdam (Ian Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe*). In changing times, cultures, languages and context, IBTS Centre continues keeping up vibrantly the legacy of experimenting in Christian and specifically Baptist internationalism in learning and research (Carol Woodfin, *An Experiment in Christian Internationalism: A History of the European Baptist Theological Seminary*). The collection of essays in this issue of the journal is a good example of this commitment.

Regular readers of this journal may have noticed that it has on several occasions included the texts of the two major lecture series sponsored in alternate years by IBTS, the Nordenhaug and Hughey Lectures. In this volume we are honoured to publish the texts of two of the Nordenhaug Lectures delivered last November by Dr. Cathy Ross. The overall theme of her lecture-series was “Attending to the Global Christianity: Hospitality and Mission” relating organically Christian mission work in the globalised world with the venerated but often not held firm to Christian virtue of hospitality. Her two lectures published in this issue reflect on hospitality as a metaphor for mission in our world today. Dr. Ross looks at such themes as: welcome of guest and stranger, the gift of sight, the importance of nourishment, attentiveness, presence and marginality.

The rest of the materials in this issue are papers read and discussed at the international conference on convictional theologies, celebrating the theological heritage of the late Prof. James Wm. McClendon Jr. It was hosted by the IBTS Centre on 04-06 November 2014 in Amsterdam. It is fitting for the occasion to begin this collection with an essay of McClendon himself. We decided to publish an earlier account of his understanding of baptist with small *b* as a distinguished stream of being Christians in the line of the Radical

Reformation with distinct identity marks. The paper was delivered originally as the graduation address at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüslikon in 1985 and it is deposited in IBTS Centre's archives. McClendon argues for a unique narrative biblical hermeneutics or scriptural reading strategy of the baptists – the baptist vision captured in the motto 'this is that'. His quest has been for an understanding of the baptist idea, its organising theme or vision. For him the best expression of that idea is one that incorporates other, partial expressions, yet displays the uniqueness of this distinctive baptist variety of Christian faith.

In his essay Barry Harvey examines several discrepancies in the McClendon's theological vision. Harvey insists that hermeneutical principle mentioned above perpetuates a troublesome ambiguity in the univocal force that McClendon attributes to the copula 'is'. Harvey offers instead to rephrase it as 'this as that'. He contests McClendon's claim that the 'is' is 'immediate'. According to him, it is problematic, because it opens up the possibility of an unmediated connection to Jesus. Such an unmediated relationship, he maintains, does not treat adequately the fact that most Christians are Gentiles and not Jews. Harvey also raises a question about the project of denominational or confessional-specific theologies, which he believes is on a collision course with the ecumenical aspirations of uniting Christianity.

Parush Parushev on his part affirms James McClendon's claim that baptistic communities, which the Baptists are a representation of, constitute a distinguished form of Christian life with distinct hermeneutics of the biblical narrative guided by the baptistic vision. This vision provides necessary and sufficient scope for an authentic baptistic theology to take shape. The baptistic way of theologising is defined as communal, convictional and contextual. The vector of theologising takes its direction from the lived-out or primary theology of the gathering, intentional, convictional community and points to the scholarly theological discourse.

David McMillan's paper demonstrates the significance of the work of the late Dutch theologian Willem F. Zuurdeeg for the later work of James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith as they developed the concept of convictions in the hope of contributing a means of addressing convictional conflicts. The paper also provides a summary of McClendon and Smith's critique and development of Zuurdeeg's thinking.

Henk Bakker set himself to investigate the intertwining of convictional theology with the abstract concept of moral space. In his view the development of convictional types of faith enhance the awareness of moral space for the church to live by? He advocates that the convictive knowledge of a Christian believer is redemptive knowledge, as it is primarily

related to the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, shared convictions form the community of believers into a body of intentionality, and consequently also into a communal ‘web’ of moral space, with shared values. Convictional communities aim at developing covenanting relations and forming a form of social life inclined to make moral interventions for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

Stuart Blythe’s essay makes a fresh contribution to expanding on the domain of convictional theologising by including afresh the voice of the late Australian theologian and former alumnus of IBTS Athol Gill. Taking his lead from the concept of ‘incarnational disciples’ developed in the work of late Prof. Glen Stassen, Blythe identifies Gill as such a disciple – who have proven faithful in times of trial. This faithfulness can be attributed at least in part to their holding a set of convictions regarding Jesus Christ, the concern of God for the world, and the necessity of resisting the injustice inflicted by dominant ideologies. Blythe argues that the centrality of Jesus Christ as the model for discipleship, the importance of community, and the holistic nature of mission are at the heart of Athol Gill’s thought and actions. In Blythe’s view Gill exhibited the qualities, which Stassen attributes to those who should be recognised as notable examples of the Christian faith, by pursuing these concerns often in the face of institutional and social conservatism.

The Editorial Board of *Baptistic Theologies* intends to make available to our readers all contributions discussed at the conference and submitted for publication in the subsequent issues of the journal. Our hope is that the thoughts conferred at this international gathering of scholars will enhance, refresh, enrich, and also challenge the discourse on convictional theologising.

**Parush Parushev**

# Attending to Global Christianity:<sup>1</sup>

## I. Hospitality as Creating Space for the Other

Cathy Ross

**Abstract:** Discussing the theme of attending to the global Christianity, the paper relates Christian mission work in the globalised world with the venerated but often not held firm to Christian virtue of hospitality. It reflects on hospitality as a metaphor for mission in our world today. Hospitality is a vital component of mission in believers' daily lives; actual acts of hospitality make Christians better disciples and ensure that another world is possible.

**Keywords:** hospitality, attentiveness, presence, marginality, creating space

### Introduction

Ever since we left Aotearoa in New Zealand for the first time in 1985, and have lived in a number of countries in Europe and East Africa, I have been reflecting on hospitality. I have also been reflecting on hospitality as I have observed it in practice in a range of church plants and missional communities I have visited around England as part of an ongoing research project.

So, just what is hospitality? The online Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the friendly and generous reception and entertainment of guests, visitors, or strangers,”<sup>2</sup> which is a good definition as it already implies, friendship, generosity and attentiveness to the other – whether they be friend or stranger. In the West, we have tended to water it down or commercialise it into an industry with training courses, certificates, five star ratings and ‘meet and greet’ attitudes. Increasingly, hospitality has also become a contested idea as we face fear of the stranger and ambivalence towards engaging with the other. However, hospitality is a fertile concept, full of potential and part of a rich Biblical tradition echoing through the ages. Most of the ancient world regarded hospitality as a fundamental virtue and practice, as do many cultures still in our world today. In the Ancient Near East there was a sacred bond between guest and host and when guest or host violated their responsibility to each other, the world was shaken. The offering and receiving of hospitality was holy ground.

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<sup>1</sup> These texts form the basis of the Nordenhaug Lectures, delivered by Dr Ross at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam in November 2013. “The Nordenhaug Memorial lectures” were established in memory of Dr. Josef Nordenhaug, one-time President of the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschlikon, Switzerland (1950 - 1960) and a former Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (1960 - 1969).

<sup>2</sup> [http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american\\_english/hospitality](http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/american_english/hospitality) accessed 18 February 2015.

## Hospitality as welcome of the stranger

Israel experienced God as a God of Hospitality. Stories of hospitality are foundational to their very existence and identity. These stories of hospitality contain themes and tensions which resonate through the centuries – stories of hospitality received and hospitality abused. The well-known story of Abraham and Sarah welcoming three strangers brought them good news and bad in the context of their hospitality. The guests confirmed they would have a son in their old age, but they also warned Abraham of the impending destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Hospitality was considered an important duty and often we see the hosts becoming beneficiaries of their guests and strangers. So Abraham and Sarah entertained angels in Gen 18, the widow of Zarephath benefited from Elijah's visit (I Kings 17), and Rahab and her family were saved from death by welcoming Joshua's spies (Joshua 2). Christine D. Pohl remarks in her superb book on hospitality, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, 'The first formative story of the biblical tradition on hospitality is unambiguously positive about welcoming strangers.'<sup>3</sup>

The very etymology of the word "hospitality" is illuminating. In Latin the word that signifies host is *hospes* and the word for enemy is *hostis*, from which we derive hostile. So this suggests ambiguity and tension around the concept of hospitality. However, the derivation from the Greek offers us something slightly different. There is an interesting and intriguing conundrum around the Greek word *xenos* which denotes simultaneously guest, host, or stranger. The Greek word for hospitality in the New Testament, *philoxenia*, refers not so much to love of strangers but to a delight in the whole guest-host relationship and in the surprises that may occur. Jesus is portrayed as a gracious host, welcoming children, tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners into his presence and therefore offending those who would prefer such guests not to be at His gatherings. But Jesus is also portrayed as vulnerable guest and needy stranger who came to his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:11). Pohl comments that this 'intermingling of guest and host roles in the person of Jesus is part of what makes the story of hospitality so compelling for Christians.'<sup>4</sup> Think of Jesus on the Emmaus Road as traveling pilgrim and stranger, recognised as host and who he was in the breaking of bread during a meal involving an act of hospitality. Or think of the Peter and Cornelius story (interestingly, another story involving varieties of food)—who is the host and who is the guest? Both offer and receive, both listen and learn, both are challenged and

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<sup>3</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room, Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



changed by the hospitality of the other. So we can see the importance of not only the ambiguity but also the fluidity of the host/guest conundrum. We offer and receive as both guest or stranger and host. In fact, strangers may actually enhance our well-being rather than diminish it. The three major festivals of the church—Christmas, Easter and Pentecost—all have to do with the advent of a divine stranger. In each case this stranger—the baby, the resurrected Christ, and the wind of the Holy Spirit—all meet us as mysterious or strange visitors, breaking into our world, challenging our worldviews and systems, and welcoming us to new worlds.<sup>5</sup>

Quaker scholar and educationalist Parker Palmer reminds us in his intriguing book, *The Company of Strangers: Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (1986), of the importance of the stranger. Our spiritual pilgrimage is a quest, a venture into the unknown, away from safety and security into strange places; for if we remain where we are, we have no need of faith. The visitors to Abraham and Sarah and the stranger on the Emmaus Road brought new truths to their lives. According to Palmer, we need the stranger. In his view, 'the stranger is not simply one who needs us. We need the stranger. We need the stranger if we are to know Christ and serve God, in truth and in love.'<sup>6</sup> For him hospitality is:

...inviting the stranger into our private space, whether that be the space of our own home or the space of our personal awareness and concern. And when we do, some important transformations occur. Our private space is suddenly enlarged; no longer tight, cramped, restricted, but open and expansive and free. And our space may also be illumined... Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes.<sup>7</sup>

So the stranger, the other, becomes a person of promise. The stranger may be unsettling; the stranger may challenge or provoke us; the stranger may provide a wider perspective. Remember the injunction from the book of Hebrews: 'Keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it (13:2, NIV).' Strangers save us from cosy, domesticated hospitality and force us out of our comfort zones. Strangers may transform us and challenge us. 'Hospitality to the stranger gives us a chance to see our own lives afresh, through different eyes.'<sup>8</sup>

Palmer goes on to consider the invitation of people into our private space—probably our home. For most of us, our home is the place and space

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<sup>5</sup> See John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality, Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2001), p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 131.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality*, p. 6.

we have available for hospitality. For a private culture, this may be a challenge—to open up our home and offer it as a shared space. Yes, there is risk involved, but when hospitality happens God is encountered in a new way:

Hospitality questions one's way of thinking about oneself and the other as belonging to different spheres; it breaks down categories that isolate. Hospitality involves a way of thinking without the presumption of knowing beforehand what is in the mind of the other; dialogue with the other is essential... To welcome the other means the willingness to enter the world of the other...<sup>9</sup>

So hospitality is transformational, and it may also be deeply counter-cultural in our current context.

To love our neighbour, to enter into the presence of another human being, is to enter into the presence of God. In Genesis we are reminded that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9). This is a profound way of speaking about human nature. This provides our starting point for relating to the stranger. As John Taylor reminds us in his book, *The Go-Between God, The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission*, 'If one is closed up against being hurt, or blind towards one's fellow-men, [sic] one is inevitably shut off from God also. One cannot choose to be open in one direction and closed in another.'<sup>10</sup>

This understanding of the image of God is integrally related to the Trinity which means it is not primarily an individualistic understanding, but a relational one. This can help us in our relating to the stranger. Paul Fiddes, in his book, *Participating in God, A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, urges us to do more than just imitate the triune God by actually participating in the Trinity. He claims that this participation then enables us to truly appreciate the other because of our engagement with the other. Engagement in the life of God means an experience of otherness—the otherness of God from humanity, the otherness of the Creator from the created. He writes:

Nothing in the world can prepare us for this gulf of otherness in a God who abides in the unity of love. ...Because it is an otherness which arises in participation within God, it can only be known *through* participation. To engage in the relationships in God means that we are brought up against the challenge of the alien, the radically different, the unlike; but at the same time we have the security of experiencing a fellowship more intimate than anything we can otherwise know.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Lucien Richard, OM, *Living the Hospitality of God* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Go-Between God, The Holy Spirit and the Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1972), p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God, A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: DLT, 2000), p. 55.

Our ego is broken open by encountering the Thou in the other and through the Thou of other people we can meet the transcendent Thou—God. So again, we need the stranger to break us open, to enlarge our private (and inner) space, and to meet God in a new way. Hospitality to the stranger may mean sacrifice; it may be hard work; it may mean that we have to surrender our own interests and concerns for the sake of the other. But I am sure we have all had this experience, or at least a suggestion of it, where we have encountered or been encountered by a stranger. Maybe it has been awkward or difficult, but the encounter challenged or transformed us in some way. In fact, Kosuke Koyama defines mission as ‘extending hospitality to strangers.’<sup>12</sup>

Hospitality is subversive because it undermines and challenges existing power structures and restores human dignity and respect. Moreover, the practice of hospitality protects us from the danger of abusing ownership and possession. Hospitality to the stranger is, in fact, a statement about how we perceive ownership and possession. In God’s new Kingdom, we sit lightly to ownership and possessions because the call to follow Christ means that we are willing to give up everything to belong to his family. Jesus reinforces this in the two great texts of Luke 14 and Matthew 25 where he distinguishes between conventional and Christian hospitality. In Luke 14 Jesus says:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you (14:12-14).

This is, of course, the prelude to the parable of the Great Banquet, a powerful metaphor for the Kingdom of God, where all are universally welcomed. When the expected guests turn down the invitation to the banquet, the same four groups are to be invited: “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind,” and then everyone else from the highways and byways. And in Matthew 25 Jesus explicitly identifies himself with the stranger. Here, God’s invitation into the Kingdom of God is clearly linked to Christian hospitality in this life. This has been a key passage in the entire Christian tradition of hospitality. Dorothy Day, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement explained the significance of this passage for her life of hospitality to destitute people:

There He was, homeless. Would a church take Him in today—feed Him, clothe Him, offer Him a bed? I hope I ask myself that question on the last day of my

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<sup>12</sup> Kosuke Koyama, “‘Extend Hospitality to Strangers’ – A Missiology of Theologia Crucis,” in *International Review of Mission* 83, no 327 (July/Oct 1993), p. 285.

life. I once prayed and prayed to God that He never, ever let me forget to ask that question.<sup>13</sup>

It is becoming clear that welcoming the stranger is a fundamental requirement of being a Christian.

Ultimately Israel's obligation to care for the stranger is because of her experience as a stranger and alien. God instructs them to care for the alien and stranger as they themselves were aliens in the land of Egypt. Just as God created them as a nation, delivered them from slavery in Egypt, and fed them in the wilderness, so their hospitality in turn serves as a reminder of and witness to God's hospitality towards them. And always they have the stories in their tradition that guests and strangers might be angels, bringing divine promises and provision. In the early church, hospitality was an important discipline. Offering care to strangers was one of the distinctive features of being a Christian.

Just a cautionary note here—I would like to remind us not to overstate the strangeness of the stranger. The stranger may be other, and we may need the stranger, but let us always remember that the stranger is made in the image of God; that the stranger is made of the same human flesh; that we share our humanity in common. If we overstate otherness then we may exaggerate their strangeness as Nazi Germany did towards the Jews, for example. This ultimately leads to the rhetoric of ethnic cleansing and fuels current fears about migrants being different and other.

## Hospitality as seeing the other

To be able to practise hospitality we need the gift of sight. This is a gift of the Holy Spirit as John Taylor reminds us. The Holy Spirit is the Go-Between who opens our inward eyes and makes us aware of the other. 'The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality.'<sup>14</sup>

The concept of sight and recognition of the other are clear in the Parable in Matthew 25 when the righteous say to Jesus, 'Lord when did we *see* you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we *see* you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we *see* you sick or in prison and go and visit you?' (25:37-9).

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 22. See also Sara Miles, *Take This Bread, A Radical Conversion* (New York: Ballantine, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *The Go-Between God*, p. 19.

And we all know Jesus' answer. Here again we experience the subversive dimension of hospitality. When we do what Jesus commended in Matthew 25—visit those in prison, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, entertain the stranger—we are living out a very different set of values and relationships. We are according dignity to others; we are breaking social boundaries; we are including those who are so often excluded; we are engaged in transformation. It begins with seeing the other person; the act of recognition—a powerful act indeed. Looking the other in the eye—the establishment of the 'I-Thou' relationship is a fundamental act of hospitality because it acknowledges people's humanity, accords them dignity, and denies their invisibility. As Pohl says:

Hospitality resists boundaries that endanger persons by denying their humanness. It saves others from the invisibility that comes from social abandonment. Sometimes, by the very act of welcome, a vision for a whole society is offered, a small evidence that transformed relations are possible.<sup>15</sup>

Think of the Good Samaritan who refused to pass by or pretend that he had not *seen* the wounded man. His act of hospitality crossed ethnic boundaries, caused him personal cost and inconvenience, and saved a life. When we see the other person, we see the image of God, as well as our common humanity, which establishes a fundamental dignity, respect and common bond. The parable in Matthew 25 reminds us that we can *see* Christ in every guest and stranger.

If we had been able to “see the other” might the genocide in Rwanda or Cambodia never have happened? If we were able “to see the other” might the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the civil war in Northern Ireland, the ignorance and apathy concerning Sudan and Congo, *apartheid* in South Africa, tribalism, caste and class systems, oppressive colonialism—might all this have been avoided—if only we could see? Who are we blind to in our contexts, which prevents us from seeing the other person and, wittingly or unwittingly, means that we practise a theology of exclusion rather than of embrace? Might it be the Dalit, the untouchable, the homeless person selling *The Big Issue*, whom we have never noticed before, whom we have never seen before, whom we have always passed by in the street and never looked in the eye nor exchanged a greeting? Might it be the old women in our congregations, who always faithfully provide the food, clean the church, arrange the flowers—have we ever taken the time to ‘see’ them and to thank them? Might it be the young people whose music is so loud, whose language is incomprehensible, whose body-piercing and head shaving is so alien—have we ever stopped to look them in the eye, to appreciate their music, to consider the pressures they may be under—the bleak prospect of

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<sup>15</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 64.

unemployment, broken homes, student loans, an uncertain future—have we ever stopped to look them in the eye and tried to understand them in their context? Might it be those migrants who never learn our language, who never even try to integrate, who take over whole streets and suburbs in our cities—have we ever had them in our homes, offered them hospitality and tried to ‘see’ their culture? In humility, let us ask ourselves whom the Holy Spirit might be calling us to ‘see.’

So Christianity is a way of seeing, and here we are trying to see or envision a world where hospitality to the stranger becomes a way of life. Offering hospitality to the stranger, without gaining advantage or expecting anything in return, is counter-cultural. It goes against the grain. But this is what Jesus offers us, an upside-down Kingdom, an alternative reality, a remedial perspective. The parables of the Great Banquet and of the Sheep and the Goats do, indeed, mean a reconstruction of reality. God’s universal welcome is displayed and, as we see the other, we are welcoming Jesus. This is, indeed, a new way of seeing and makes me think of one of the OCCUPY slogans, ‘Another world is possible.’

## **Hospitality as nourishing the other**

Pohl reminds us that we need to eat together to sustain our identity. Think how important it is to eat together as a family, and the same applies to a church community. She writes, ‘the table is central to the practice of hospitality in home and church—the nourishment we gain there is physical, spiritual and social.’<sup>16</sup> Offering food and drink to guests is central to almost every act of hospitality. This takes time. It requires attention to the other; it requires an effort. It requires us to stop and focus. As a Benedictine monk once observed, ‘In a fast-food culture, you have to remind yourself that some things cannot be done quickly. Hospitality takes time.’<sup>17</sup> This is a challenge in our time-starved culture. Hospitality emerges from a willingness to create time and space.

The theme of banqueting, of food and drink, is central in the ministry of Jesus. Was he not accused of being a glutton and a drunkard and of eating with sinners? Jesus was celebrating the messianic banquet, but with all the wrong people! Bretherton even goes so far as to state that, ‘This table fellowship with sinners and the reconfiguring of Israel’s purity boundaries which this hospitality represents signifies the heart of Jesus’ mission.’<sup>18</sup> Jesus and his followers here are also celebrating the abundance of God—

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<sup>16</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup> Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness, Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Farnham Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2006), p. 128.

think of all the stories of food and drink overflowing, of parties enjoyed, of the feeding of the five thousand. God's household is a household of superabundance, of extravagant hospitality, where food and wine is generously shared and the divine welcome universally offered. Jesus' rejection of social and religious categories of inclusion and exclusion was offensive to the authorities. As one theologian expressed it, 'Jesus got himself crucified by the way he ate.'<sup>19</sup>

Shared meals are therefore central to hospitality and to mission. Michele Hershberger claims that when we eat together we are 'playing out the drama of life'<sup>20</sup> as we begin to share stories, let down our guard, and welcome strangers. Alongside the sharing of food is the sharing of stories. Rev Rebecca Nyegenye, chaplain at Uganda Christian University, told me that in Uganda, hospitality goes with both elaborate meals and listening to the visitor. Ugandans believe that for any relationship to be strong, food and intentional listening must be shared. Listening is an important part of honouring the guest—in both hospitality and mission, listening to the other is the beginning of understanding and of entering the other's world.

Eating together is a great leveller. It is something that we all must do so it has a profoundly egalitarian dimension. Jean Vanier, of l'Arche Community, confessed that when he started to share meals with men with serious mental disabilities, 'Sitting down at the same table meant becoming friends with them, creating a family. It was a way of life absolutely opposed to the values of a competitive, hierarchical society in which the weak are pushed aside.'<sup>21</sup> When we eat together, as we let down our guard and share stories, we begin to create relationship and this is at the heart of mission—our relationship with God and neighbour. In a unique moment in the book of Ephesians, we see Jews and Gentiles coming together. The test of their coming together was the meal table—the institution that once symbolised ethnic and cultural division now became a symbol of Christian living. Eating together locates us in the *missio Dei*.<sup>22</sup>

This is perhaps most powerfully expressed in the Eucharist, where this ritualised eating and drinking together re-enacts the crux of the gospel. As we remember what it cost Jesus to welcome us into relationship with God, we remember with sorrow the agony and the pain, but at the same time we rejoice and celebrate our reconciliation and this new relationship made possible because of Christ's sacrifice and supreme act of hospitality. We

<sup>19</sup> Robert J. Karris, *Luke: Artist and Theologian* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 47.

<sup>20</sup> Michele Hershberger, *A Christian View of Hospitality, Expecting Surprises* (Kitchener, Ont.: Herald Press, 1999), p. 104.

<sup>21</sup> Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> See E. Katangole, "Mission and the Ephesian Moment of World Christianity: Pilgrimages of Pain and Hope and the Economics of Eating Together," *Mission Studies* 29, no 2 (2012), pp. 183-201.

rejoice in our new relationship with God made possible through the Cross, and we rejoice as we partake of this meal together in community. When we share in the Eucharist, we are not only foreshadowing the great heavenly banquet to come but we are also nourished on our journey towards God's banquet table. Jesus is, quite literally, the Host as we partake of his body and blood and we are the guests as we feed on him by faith with thanksgiving. In this way, the Eucharist connects hospitality at a very basic level with God and with the *missio Dei* as it anticipates and reveals God's heavenly table and the coming Kingdom.<sup>23</sup> This is beautifully expressed in one of the Eucharistic prayers from the *New Zealand Prayer Book*:

Most merciful Lord,  
 Your love compels us to come in.  
 Our hands were unclean  
 Our hearts were unprepared; we were not fit  
 Even to eat the crumbs from under your table.  
 But you, Lord, are the God of our salvation,  
 and share your bread with sinners.  
 So cleanse and feed us  
 With the precious body and blood of your Son,  
 That He may live in us and we in Him;  
 And that we, with the whole company of Christ,  
 May sit and eat in your kingdom.<sup>24</sup>

Vanier claims that as we eat together we become friends—no longer guest, nor stranger. Indeed, we were all strangers until God welcomed us into his household by grace to be His friends—the supreme act of God's hospitality. Friendship is a powerful force for good, friendship moves us towards wholeness. Jesus offered his disciples friendship rather than servanthood (John 15:15) and this is what the Eucharist offers us—an invitation to friendship, community, and family.

## Conclusion

So how do we live this out? What does this mean for our daily discipleship? I think what all this means is that hospitality is a vital component of mission in our daily lives. Actual acts of hospitality, welcoming the other, embracing the stranger, seeing our neighbour, eating together, will fuel our spirituality, make us better disciples and ensure that another world is possible. As I have visited various church plants and missional communities around England, I have been impressed with the commitment to hospitality. It does not have to

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<sup>23</sup> See Hershberger, *A Christian View*, pp. 228-9 for further discussion on this.

<sup>24</sup> *A New Zealand Prayer Book, He Karakia Mihinare o Aotearoa* (Auckland: William Collins, 1989), p. 425.



be anything elaborate—open homes, joyful meals, simple Bible studies—always with food, childcare provided, transport made available, healing on the streets offered, care for vulnerable people, shelter for the homeless, conversation and company for the lonely, prayer, testimonies and stories of lives changed, seeing and welcoming the stranger in a myriad of ways, going the extra mile, playing with the guest/host polarity is all part of hospitality.

I have seen and experienced the missional impetus of hospitality where people are welcomed in and introduced to Jesus. In groups around the country, I have heard new Christians say, ‘this church is family to me, it has become my family. I belong.’ That is authentic hospitality—I introducing people to Jesus and his household where anyone can belong and Jesus is the true Host.

**Dr Cathy Ross**

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## Attending to Global Christianity:<sup>1</sup>

### II. Attentiveness as Creating Space for Hospitality

Cathy Ross

**Abstract:** Following on the reflections of hospitality as a means for creating space for the other where the true human encounter and redemptive transformation can take place, the argument of this paper is that attentiveness to those in need and on the margins provides space for hospitality. Good listening to and involvement in the life of the other requires humility, vulnerability, availability, receptivity and patience.

**Keywords:** hospitality, vulnerability, attentiveness, mission

### Introduction

In this lecture I would like to think about attentiveness as a vital component of hospitality. Attentiveness to God, to the other, and to our own beliefs and behaviour are important if we are to be faithful disciples. What do I mean by attentiveness and how is this linked to hospitality?

To live attentively to the world in God's name is our human vocation. This is why we have been made in the image of God. God pays attention to God's creation—this is obvious by the fact that God created the world and all that is in it; and because of the infinite variety, depth, creativity, and diversity present in creation. God pursues our world in its brokenness—God is not a dispassionate observer or a mechanistic maker of models. God is engaged in, identifies with, and participates in the world. God does not just pay attention to part of the world, but God is radically attentive to the whole world, at all times and in all places. The incarnation is, of course, the most radical expression of God's attentiveness—God's proximity, God's imminence, God's presence. We, too, are called to pay attention to the world; to the particular work of people, relationships, culture, economics, religion, sociology, power, land issues, art, literature, and more. Our attentiveness to God's world, to creation and to humanity in all its glorious diversity mirrors the attentiveness of God.

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<sup>1</sup> These texts form the basis of the Nordenhaug Lectures, delivered by Dr Ross at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam in November 2013. "The Nordenhaug Memorial lectures" were established in memory of Dr. Josef Nordenhaug, one time President of the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschlikon, Switzerland (1950 - 1960) and a former Secretary of the Baptist World Alliance (1960 - 1969).

Recently my attention was drawn again to the story of Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38-42). Martha seems such a welcoming hostess—indeed we are told that she ‘opened her home to him [Jesus]’ (10:38, NIV). Then she busies herself with all that needs to be done to provide a hospitable welcome for the guest. However, the text tells us that ‘Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made’ (10:40). I have always felt sorry for Martha that Jesus seems so harsh when she complains that her sister will not help her. Moreover, he praises Mary for sitting at his feet and listening. But Jesus can see into Martha’s heart and he knows that she is distracted rather than attentive. Perhaps Martha’s heart is focussed on the tasks rather than on Jesus. ‘Mary’s whole-hearted focus on her guest is as much an expression of love and welcome as Martha’s practical care. Each needs the other. For hospitality is a matter of the heart as well as of the hearth.’<sup>2</sup>

Hospitality involves paying attention. We discussed earlier<sup>3</sup> how we need to pay attention to the stranger and the gifts that the stranger can bring to us if we can create the space for that to happen. Paying attention and the gift of attentiveness are worked out so much more easily and fruitfully in community. For me, being a part of the community of the Church Mission Society (CMS) of the Anglican Communion has helped me enormously. CMS has enabled me, over the years, to pay attention to God’s world in all its beauty and pain. And CMS has helped to save me from domesticity and domestication; because the weight of sin pushes us to curve in on ourselves, to self-interest and self-absorption, to consumption, to small and myopic distractions. To be a part of the CMS community has opened up a wider vision of the Kingdom of God, a broader and more challenging apprehension of the gospel, a larger understanding of God’s world and a renewed vision.

## Attentiveness to whom?

To whom is God calling us to be attentive today? “Who is my neighbour?”—the well-known question put to Jesus which has echoed down the centuries to us ever since. We must all work out our answer to this in our own contexts, but one answer I would like to suggest that applies to all of us, is that we must pay attention to our sisters and brothers in the world church. We need what they have to offer us and they need our hospitality and deep listening. Why? Why should I care about the world church? Why is this so important? It is important because we are all part of one body. Paul’s body analogy in 1 Corinthians 12 is crucial to understanding what it means to be a world Christian. ‘For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body—whether

<sup>2</sup> Rev Kevin Franz, Mental Health Chaplain and Member of the Society of Friends, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01ph59z>, accessed 31.12.2012.

<sup>3</sup> See Dr Ross’ first lecture, ‘Hospitality as Creating Space for the Other,’ in this volume.

Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink’ (1 Corinthians 12:13). By the Spirit we are united into one body and by using this body rhetoric Paul explicitly states that we need one another. Paul defines self-sufficiency as having no need of another and he believes that this is alien to the body of Christ. Moreover, as Anthony Thistleton elaborates in his superb commentary on 1 Corinthians, this body imagery, ‘explicitly rebukes those who think that they and their “superior” gifts are self-sufficient for the whole body, or that others are scarcely authentic parts of the body, as they themselves are.’<sup>4</sup> Paul’s rhetoric pushes for a reversal of a worldly understanding of honour and status. ‘The lower is made higher, and the higher lower.’<sup>5</sup> Let us not think of ourselves more highly than we ought. This should give us pause for thought when we are still in a world captivated by honour and status, where the church in the West still commands unimaginable resources, prime real estate, honorific titles, and is sometimes co-opted by (or at least colludes with) secular powers.

How are those members of the world-church really my neighbours and how can I begin to offer hospitality in any significant way? Allow me to offer a few suggestions: by listening, by learning, and by creating space for change.

In life, to listen is to become involved. Good listening requires humility, vulnerability, availability, receptivity and patience. To be a good listener means to be attentive. Paul Tillich has a helpful insight on listening:

In order to know what is just in a person-to-person encounter, love listens. It is its first task to listen. No human relation, especially no intimate one, is possible without mutual listening ... All things and all men [sic], so to speak, call on us with small or loud voices. They want us to listen; they want us to understand their intrinsic claims, their justice of being. They want justice from us. But we can give it to them only through love which listens ... Listening love is the first step to justice in person-to-person encounters.<sup>6</sup>

Listening then, is vital for attentiveness. Dame Evelyn Glennie, who lost her hearing at the age of twelve, is fully aware of this. She explains that we need time with people in order to interpret them. She says that when we listen to each other, we need to use our body as a resonance chamber and to stop any preconceived judgement.<sup>7</sup>

‘During the twentieth century, the geographical centre of the church moved South and East, so the heartlands of the Christian faith are no longer

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<sup>4</sup> A. Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians, A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 1005.

<sup>5</sup> Dale Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 96.

<sup>6</sup> P. Tillich in M. Warren, *Partnership: The Study of an Idea* (London: SCM, 1956), p. 14.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn\\_glennie\\_shows\\_how\\_to\\_listen.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen.html), accessed 16 February 2015.

in the North Atlantic region but rather in Africa, Asia and Latin America.<sup>8</sup> And yet we still suffer from the premise that Western theology is somehow neutral, objective and universal.

Listen to these comments from John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian:

Theologians from the new (or younger) churches have made their pilgrimages to the theological learning of the older churches. We had no alternative. We have eaten theology with you; we have drunk theology with you; we have dreamed theology with you. But it has all been one-sided; it has all been in a sense, your theology... We know you theologically. The question is do you know us theologically? Would you like to know us theologically?<sup>9</sup>

As Samuel Escobar and Steve Bevans have reminded us, all theology is contextual. So we need to create the space to listen to and learn from our brothers and sisters in the Majority World. Today, the Christian world is experiencing greater diversity than it has ever known before and this offers us a new era in theology and in worship. We may be challenged to move in completely new theological directions and encounter new approaches to issues such as the nature of systemic evil, principalities and powers, healings and exorcisms, ancestors, pre-Christian past, the nature of conversion, living with other faiths, the content of worship, attitudes to wealth and possessions, and much more. All this will radically expand our faith, stretch our understanding of Jesus, and challenge our discipleship. This will not happen unless we listen carefully and listen well. As we listen to and learn from other places and contexts, then our blind spots will be addressed. For example, our more individualist readings of the Scriptures may be challenged by the more communal readings which draw attention to the biblical emphasis on corporate solidarity, structural sin, and communal witness. We may find that reflection on the role of the ancestors pertinent for us here in the West. How one deals with this invokes basic issues of identity, community, belonging, pluralism, our past and our future. These are questions we all have in common as part of the body of Christ. While these may be worked out in a specific way in the African context, they may challenge us and enlarge our understanding of our own contexts. Indeed a recent book, *The Faith of the English* by Nigel Rooms, draws on Kwame Bediako's work where the author makes a plea that the English should not 'denigrate [their] own primal religion.'<sup>10</sup> And so what may have started off as being far away soon connects with our own story.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Greenman and G. Green, (eds.), *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2012), p. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa, The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), p. 155.

<sup>10</sup> N. Rooms, *The Faith of the English, Integrating Christ and Culture* (London: SPCK, 2011), p. 37.

Andrew Walls reminds us that the ‘rule of the palefaces’ is not yet over in Christian scholarship and Tite Tienou asserts that we still engage in a ‘dialogue of the deaf.’<sup>11</sup> He believes this happens when we marginalise scholarship from the Majority World. He also reminds us of the hegemony of the English language and how its domination can exclude scholars who cannot express themselves in English. Steve Bevans also laments this. In a lecture entitled, “What has Contextual Theology to Offer the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”<sup>12</sup> he tells the story of meeting a young doctoral student in the Philippines who offers a fresh voice and new insights in theology. But she writes in Tagalog because she believes that any other language cannot capture the full reality of what she wants to say. Of course, it is right and proper that she writes in her own language for her own context—but we are all the poorer because we cannot hear this or learn from her. I believe that the hegemony of the English language means that the world is a different shape from what it could be. We all know and are diminished by the experience of the globalising and totalising tendencies of one language to rule them all. It is not fair, but because of the need for communication we accept this compromise. Such is the way of the world. Or such is the world as we have made it.

I would like to pick up here again the idea of theological homelessness from my first lecture this morning.<sup>13</sup> Theological homelessness can lead us to think in directions that leave us disconnected with our home cultures. It means that home and the theology with which we were nurtured are never quite the same. It reminds us of and alerts us to the disorientation and lostness of being a stranger. We have lost our moorings and easy, comfortable ways of looking at things. Life, theology, the world will never be quite the same again. But this is where attentiveness to world Christianity and to the scholarship from the Majority World can help us. As we listen to the voices of the Majority World, we will learn new insights, gain fresh wisdom, be exposed to new ideas. These voices may challenge us, provoke us, make us feel uncomfortable, exacerbate our theological homelessness. It may mean that we have to change our ways of worship, praying, reading the Bible, understanding and engaging with theology. It will shape our discipleship. All this is so because we have practised attentiveness.

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<sup>11</sup> Tite Tienou, ‘Christian Theology in an Era of World Christianity,’ in Craig Ott, Harold A. Netland, and Wilbert Shenk (eds.) *Globalising Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Nottingham, UK: Apollos, 2007), p. 48.

<sup>12</sup> Unpublished, delivered at CMS, 2009, available through the author.

<sup>13</sup> “Being Attentive to World Christianity,” unpublished, delivered on 04 November 2013, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, available through the author. This lecture has set the scene for why it is vital to be a world Christian today. It considers theology and discipleship in an era of world Christianity and concludes by reflecting on theological homelessness (Editor’s note).

## Hospitality as presence

True hospitality presupposes our full presence. Presence may be best understood in terms of faithfulness—‘it means being with others and paying attention to that quality of being with.’<sup>14</sup> We are called to be faithfully present to God in our interaction with others. Henri Nouwen defines hospitality as ‘being articulately present to the guest, offering yourself as a point of orientation or a frame of reference... You are not hospitable when you leave your house alone and tell the stranger that they can use it. An empty house is not a hospitable house.’<sup>15</sup> So it is our responsibility to be faithfully present and attentive to the other in God’s world. This was most perfectly modelled and sustained by Godself in Jesus in the incarnation where he came to be present in the world.

Hospitality as presence may be practised more authentically in community. This is why our faith communities or churches are so important. What is church? What is the church? How do we describe the church, which is divinely instituted but humanly organised with all our frailties and failings? My favourite biblical metaphor is the church as the household of God (Ephesians 2:22) with Jesus as the cornerstone. This is a metaphor we can all relate to because we have all experienced a household, a dwelling place, in some form or other. At its best, a household or dwelling place evokes stability, warmth, safety, relationships with people who care about us, home. The church as the household of God is where God is, where we can find God, where we can live with God. Pope Francis speaks of the church as ‘a mother with an open heart... whose doors are open.’ He expands this picture by adding that, ‘The Church is called to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open... where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems.’<sup>16</sup> This is a powerful and beautiful picture of church as a place where our Mother/Father God is ready to welcome all. This metaphor resonates with the theme of hospitality, for surely the church, as the household of God and the body of Christ, is the institution *par excellence* which exemplifies and lives out hospitality as its mission and its purpose.

One of the marks of a missional church is that it is relational. The *Mission Shaped Church Report* expresses it like this:

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<sup>14</sup> Neil Holm, *Journal of Christian Education* 52, no. 1 (May 2009), p. 8. [http://www.academia.edu/1256854/Toward\\_a\\_Theology\\_of\\_the\\_Ministry\\_of\\_Presence\\_in\\_Chaplaincy](http://www.academia.edu/1256854/Toward_a_Theology_of_the_Ministry_of_Presence_in_Chaplaincy) accessed 16 February 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Henri Nouwen, “Hospitality,” *Monastic Studies*, 10 (Easter, 1974), p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* of the Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World, p. 46 and p. 47. [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium_en.html)

In a missionary church, a community of faith is being formed. It is characterized by welcome and hospitality. Its ethos and style are open to change when new members join. Believers are encouraged to establish inter-dependent relationships with fellow Christians as they grow into Christ. As a community it is aware that it is incomplete without inter-dependent relationships with other Christian churches and communities. It does not seek to stand alone.<sup>17</sup>

Church or community are sustained by a way of life that acknowledges that our lives and our ways of knowing are inherently relational, enhanced by our life together. Jean Vanier acknowledged this as a result of his experience of founding the l'Arche communities. He writes, 'In years to come we are going to need many small communities which will welcome lost and lonely people, offering them a new form of family and sense of belonging.'<sup>18</sup> Certainly in my visits to church plants around England, it is the small missional communities that are welcoming people in and where people are finding belonging. Vanier again: '[To welcome] is to be concerned for others, attentive towards them, and to help them find their place in the community or in life itself. To welcome means even more than to listen.'<sup>19</sup>

In our networked age, it may mean being attentive and practising community in other ways also. Here is one example. Last Advent I was part of an Advent e-community. We were each given a Bible verse or sentence on which to reflect briefly on-line. We started off with a simple party to explain the concept and then each day a person posted their verse and thoughts. For each of us, it was a marvellous experience. We commented on how it helped us to be more attentive to the Advent season. Some made comments they would never have stated in face-to-face conversation. Somehow, in this context, the anonymity of the screen helped us to be more open with one another and gradually, over our daily postings, our e-community found our hearts being strangely warmed. One member of the community wrote, 'This group of journeyers have created a space for me to anticipate this world shattering birth as never before.'<sup>20</sup> This was a creative way of practising attentiveness and creating the space to be hospitable.

## Hospitality from the margins

Hospitality which practises presence and attentiveness may lead us into all kinds of deep waters. 'Hospitality as faithful presence might well involve challenge or resistance, even conflict, with certain ideas, particularly those

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<sup>17</sup> "Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context" (London: Church House Publishing, 2004), pp. 81-82.

<sup>18</sup> Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 283.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>20</sup> Sarah McKearney, email, 22 December, 2012; quoted with permission.



that would undercut the very practice itself.<sup>21</sup> This kind of presence and attentiveness might lead us to the margins, to the outsiders, to the little ones, to the poor in whom God has such a special interest and with whom Jesus spent so much time. Jesus came to his own people who were mostly ‘poor and unlearned,’ so it is amazingly good news that God had more in common with ‘the uncomplicated, the humble and the generous than with the proud and self-satisfied.’<sup>22</sup> This is where the Son of God feels most truly at home.

Poverty may be a good place to start with hospitality. Poverty of heart and mind creates space for the other. Poverty makes a good host—poverty of mind, heart, and even resources where one is not constrained by one’s possessions but is able to give freely. Hospitality from the margins reminds us of the paradoxical power of vulnerability and the importance of compassion. Christine Pohl cites the example of a friend of hers who directs a home for homeless people and who takes a few days every year to live on the streets. By doing this he experiences in a small way what it means to be marginal and invisible. He describes the impact of this:

What I experience in these journeys is replenishing the reservoir of compassion. I tend not to realise how hardened I’ve become until I get out there. And when I see someone mistreating the homeless—a professional—it’s a prophetic voice. It’s the most effective teaching method for me.<sup>23</sup>

In the ritual of the Eucharist we remind ourselves that we were aliens in need of welcome and rescue. Pohl provides us with an interesting example of wealthy women in the fourth century who chose to make themselves marginal by giving away their riches and status and offering hospitality. ‘Less marginal to the society than earlier believers, they created marginality and their behaviour became exemplary for the larger church. By accepting an ascetic lifestyle and renouncing family, sexuality, wealth, and status these women became liminal...’<sup>24</sup> Anthropologist Victor Turner associates the most intense forms of community with contexts of liminality, marginality and inferiority. Liminality, or this in-between space, is where we can become aware of our own vulnerability and marginality. This may make it easier for us to offer compassion. When one has been a foreigner, an outsider, a migrant; when one has experienced a liminal space then one appreciates the warmth of welcome, the value of inclusion, the grace of hospitality. Moreover, marginality can allow for role/status reversal more readily, which may make hospitality more easily given and received.

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<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Newman, “Who’s Home Cooking? Hospitality, Christian Identity and Higher Education,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 26, no. 1 (Sep. 1999), p. 13.

<sup>22</sup> John V. Taylor, *The Incarnate God* (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 19-21.

<sup>23</sup> Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> Christine D. Pohl, “Hospitality from the Edge, The Significance of Marginality in the Practice of Welcome,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (Oct. 1995), p. 127.

To make oneself vulnerable reminds us that both hospitality and engagement in mission require authentic compassion and genuine love. Somehow these are more freely expressed and experienced from a context of poverty—poverty both within and without. Poverty of heart and mind reminds us that we are the needy ones; that our hands were empty before God filled them; that we are in need of grace, forgiveness, healing and newness of life. Then genuine hospitality, as well as genuine engagement in mission, can begin as we realise our own emptiness and our own need for God. As we experience the divine welcome born out of divine compassion, so then we can share this grace and hospitality with others.

## **Hospitality as creating space**

Finally, let us consider hospitality as creating space. The very act of creation is an act of creating space. Originally ‘the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep’ (Genesis 1:2) and gradually God created until ‘the heavens and the earth,’ as well as humanity, ‘were completed in their vast array’ (Genesis 2:1). God is the Creator God, the Creator of space—both literally and metaphorically. Furthermore, in the divine act of the creation of humanity, this marvellous act of generosity, we have the privilege of participating in the divine nature—the nature that created space and allows for spaciousness. And, of course, the divine nature is Trinitarian. God is not a monad—God is a community of Three divine persons. God is also one God. These realities allow not only for relationship, but also for unity and diversity. This Trinitarian understanding of God expressed so beautifully in the icon by Andrei Rublev, means that we experience God in relationship with the other within community. The concept of the Trinity allows space for the created individual, but only in relationship to the other. So each person of the Trinity has their own divine nature, expressed in relation to the other persons of the Trinity. There is the space to be each divine person, as each person relates to the other. They cannot each exist without this relationship. This understanding of the Trinity, expressed so wonderfully in this visual way by Rublev, allows us to welcome others in and to reach out to others. This icon and this understanding of Trinity pick up many themes of hospitality—of welcome, of the home or household as the place for hospitality, of relationship, of seeing the other. Catherine La Cugna, comments on this icon:

How fitting indeed that hospitality, and the quite ordinary setting of a household, should have emerged as the inspiration for this icon and so many other artistic interpretations of the Trinity. In Rublev’s icon, the temple in the background is the transformation of Abraham’s and Sarah’s house. The oak tree stands for the Tree of Life. And the position of the three figures is suggestive. Although they are arranged in a circle, the circle is not closed. One

has the distinct sensation when meditating on the icon that one is not only invited into this communion but, indeed, one already is part of it. A self-contained God, a closed divine society, would hardly be a fitting archetype for hospitality. We should not miss the significance of the Eucharistic cup in the centre, which is, of course, the sacramental sign of our communion with God and one another.<sup>25</sup>

This is not a closed society but rather an open circle, an open community where there is always space. There is space for each divine person; there is space for the other; and so there is also space for us, created in the divine image to be who we were created to be.

Henri Nouwen's definition of hospitality picks up this idea of spaciousness: 'Hospitality... means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.'<sup>26</sup> Immediately we can see the resonances for mission here. Mission, the divine invitation from God to enter into a loving relationship with God, is about allowing people the space and the time to come to God in their own way, to become the person God created them to be. Mission is not about invading their space, forcing them to come to Christ in the manner of the *conquistadores*—vanquishing them in the name of Christ; nor is it imposing or transplanting Christianity to make them like us, as was so often done in the colonial period. It also means allowing for the possibility that they may not want to change. As Paul Fiddes writes in his book, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*, 'Respect for others, of course, means that we must also be ready to be resisted by *them*.'<sup>27</sup> Rather, mission is an invitation—and an invitation can be accepted or rejected.

This creating of space may not be an easy task; it may, in fact, be hard work as we allow others the room to negotiate this space in a hospitable manner. Moreover, we need this space in both our public and private lives which interact and shape each other. We need to be able to demonstrate hospitality in both these spheres. Public and private must not be seen as being in competition with each other, and each impacts the other. If we heat our homes more than we need to, then we are consuming fossil fuels that might keep someone else warm. If we teach our children to pursue wealth and private gain, we diminish their interest in the public good. We have a choice—to live private lives that either encourage or ignore the public good. 'There is no way for the public to flourish when most people live private life

<sup>25</sup> Catherine La Cugna, *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), p. 84.

<sup>26</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out, The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (Glasgow: William Collins, 1976), pp. 68-69.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: DLT, 2000), p. 23 (italics in the original).

for its own sake.<sup>28</sup> The best deterrent against crime is not burglar bars, or an armed police force, but a caring public, aware of the common good, able to be present and attentive to the other, to create space for the other, to live hospitably both in the public and private realms. We delude ourselves if we think that private life can be enhanced by retreating from the public sphere.

## Conclusion

In these two lectures we have looked at hospitality as: welcome of the stranger, seeing the other, nourishing the other, attentiveness, presence, marginality, and creating space. May we never forget that we were once strangers until God welcomed us and may the stranger be always a person of promise, surprise, and grace. May we never lose the ability to see the other as a human being created in the image of God. May our meals together be a foreshadowing of the heavenly feast where, with the whole company of Christ, we will sit and eat in His Kingdom. May attentiveness to the world church and presence in our own communities be hallmarks of our discipleship. May God give us the strength to embrace marginality and may we live as witnesses to the spaciousness of God. There is space for all to come in, the divine invitation is that whoever believes may have eternal life. This reminds us of the theme of the Great Banquet where all are invited, all may come in, and where, ultimately, we may be surprised at who is feasting at God's table. May God always grant us the grace to experience in our own lives the truth of Matthew 24:35, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me.'

Allow me to conclude both these lectures with a Celtic prayer:

I saw a stranger last night. I put food in the eating place, drink in the drinking place, music in the listening place, and in the sacred name of the Triune, he blessed myself and my house and my cattle and my dear ones. And the lark said in her song, 'Often, often, often goes the Christ in the stranger's guise.'<sup>29</sup>

AMEN

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<sup>28</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *The Company of Strangers Christians and the Renewal of America's Public Life* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01ph59z> accessed 31 December 2012.

## The baptist Vision

James Wm. McClendon, Jr.

**Abstract:** This paper provides an earlier account of late James McClendon's understanding of baptist with small *b* as a distinguished stream of being Christians in the line of the Radical Reformation with distinct identity marks. It argues for a unique narrative biblical hermeneutics of the baptists – the baptist vision captured in the motto “this is that.”

**Key words:** baptists, baptist vision, narrative, this is that

Pentecostal Christianity, celebrated in Luke-Acts as the primal and normative model of church life, is there marked by two features: unity and diversity. On that day, ‘They were all with one accord in one place’ (Acts 2:1, KJV); whereupon the Lord added “about three thousand to their number” (vs. 41, NIV). But this unity came by way of an amazing diversity: ‘All of them were filled with the Holy *Spirit* and began to speak in other tongues’ (vs. 4). Unity and diversity: the *variety* of tongues, peoples, responses to the Spirit together with the *unity* of gospel and grace and God in resurrection light—these are the controlling themes of the text. Concretely, we encounter this text on a day when one variety of God's people, the variety called Baptists, are celebrating the graduation of a class of their sons and daughters.<sup>1</sup> These go from this place to apostolic ministry in many places, many lands. In the makeup of this class, the diversity is again evident. Yet we cannot properly celebrate their diversity, or properly acknowledge the Christian variety called “Baptist,” without acknowledging the catholic or

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is adapted from the graduation address at the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschlikon, Switzerland 25 April 1985. I have retained its form to emphasize its occasional and programmatic character, adding these notes to show some of its roots. My [McClendon's] gratitude is expressed to former President Altus Newell, to former Interim President Thorwald Lorenzen, to the faculty, staff, and students of the Seminary, and to Prof. Wayne Pipkin, who offered advice and encouragement and who for the Institute for Baptist and Anabaptist Studies accepted it for publication among the Rüschlikon Baptist Papers. Special thanks also to my wife, Dr. Nancey Murphy, and to Dr. William Brackney for criticism and advice. [The editor of this issue of *Baptistic Theologies* is grateful to Doc Dr Peter Macek and David McMillan for the courtesy of providing independently a copy of this essay from the archives of IBTS. The editor was not able to locate the publication to which McClendon refers in the footnote above in any collection of papers of the Baptist Theological Seminary, Rüschlikon or elsewhere. A significantly revised and expanded version of this text was published as “The Mennonite and Baptist Vision” in Paul Toews, ed., *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation* (Winnipeg: Kindred, 1993), pp. 211-224, 258-260. It was republished in Rayan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright, eds., *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. Volume I* with a Foreword by Nancey Murphy (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014), pp. 135-149. This is the original text of the essay. The emphases in italics, underlined in the typed text of the original, are McClendon's. McClendon's American-English spelling is retained. Here and elsewhere the editor's comments appear in square brackets.]

ecumenical unity of which we are only a part. Many have their sins forgiven without benefit of Baptist ministry, many are called into the Kingdom who do not know these ways of ours, many beyond our own church borders live by faith in Christ, and we are one with them as well. Simply to recognize this truth is one mark of the church while to deny it is a mark of the sect; “sectarians” believe that they only are saved, but baptists have never been in this sense a sectarian people.<sup>2</sup>

## I.

Those who reject the view that some one group of Christians constitutes the true church, others being consigned to heresy and to hell, have another option: Outward forms simply do not matter; religion is an inward affair, so that what we say and practice are matters of indifference.<sup>3</sup> Most Christians subscribe to this theory at least in part. Some things do not matter. These are the ‘*adiaphora*,’ the undecided doctrines, the variable customs, the local adaptations of the Christian way. This is the point in fourth century Bishop Ambrose’s sage advice to a traveler: When in Rome, do as the Romans. Yet it remains true that the Christian way is a body of practice, not merely a kind of feeling, and common practices finally require common institutions as well. Only the spiritualists have sought to avoid this conclusion, and their impact has been at least as divisive as any other.

Beside the ways of sectarian “orthodoxy” and individualistic spiritualism is a third option, the way of historical development.<sup>4</sup> This

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, to whom we owe this terminology *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper and Row, 1931) [*Die Soziallehren der christlichen Kirchen und Gruppen* (Tubingen: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1912)] provided a more sophisticated typology of church, sect, and mystical religious types in the late Middle Ages. I use here a popularization of Troeltsch’s terms.

<sup>3</sup> I owe this distinction to an important but unpublished paper by John Howard Yoder on ecumenical conversations between Anabaptists, Catholics, Reformed, and Lutherans, (Yoder 1969) [John Howard Yoder, ‘A Clarification of Views on the Church’ (Elkhart, Ind.: n.p., 1969), available electronically in the collection of the “John Howard Yoder Digital Library,” <http://palni.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15705coll18/id/3557/rec/3>, accessed 24 February 2015].

<sup>4</sup> The modern concept of development did not appear until the 19th century, when it was most fully explored by John Henry Newman, who, in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, repr. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960 [originally, London: J. Toovey, 1845]) sought to distinguish true from inauthentic development as a means of defining the true (i.e. Roman Catholic) church. The standard account of Newman’s achievement is by Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957). With the rise of the 20th century ecumenical movement Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, Volume I: 1517-1948*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1967), however, it began to appear that there might be more than one sort of authentic Christian development, each perhaps having its own *notae* or distinguishing marks of authenticity. This 20th century notion of development has not been completely explored from a perspective that would take into account the baptist vision—a task for someone willing to work. See for a start, James Edward Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (London: SMC Press, 1953, [repr. New York: Friendship, 1960]) and James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology, Volume I: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), ch. 1.

understanding of Christian unity acknowledges the importance of many varieties of Christian conduct, yet it holds that none is infallible or flawless. Each stream of Christian life can express part of the truth of Christ, though none has expressed it all. All the tongues make Pentecost. Yet the several streams cannot be combined by rejecting the special features of each, for each has its historic destiny to fulfill, each its own true course that must be followed if it would signify the Kingdom of God.

On this understanding, what is wanted in a true ecumenism is neither simple-minded endorsement of other churches nor simple-minded anathemas for those we dislike—or do not understand. The true ecumenists will not abandon their own tongues, their own truths, nor will they naively adopt others' ways. Instead, it is the task of each great Christian stream to examine itself from within, discovering its own true witness to Christ. Only when this witness is brought fully into view can it be appropriated by the others.<sup>5</sup>

What, though, is the “great Christian stream” or movement of which Baptists are a part? How shall it be named? Opinions differ. One theory, the *deviation* theory, holds that Baptists are only a variety of some more basic Christian type—English and American Baptists are only Puritans; the Swiss Brethren are a variant upon the Zwinglian reform; Dutch Mennonites only a variation upon Erasmian biblicism, etc.<sup>6</sup> A second theory, the *successionist*, holds that Baptists, Anabaptists, and many others before them are genetically linked in a long causal chain rivaling Rome's. Durnbaugh, though not its advocate, gives this view fair treatment.<sup>7</sup>

There is a third theory, which I will call the *theory of types*, advocated by Albert Henry Newman, Roland Bainton, George Williams, John Howard Yoder, Donald Durnbaugh, and still others.<sup>8</sup> It sees in the Baptist movement, not a successionist history, and not a mere deviation, but a recurrent type, of which Anabaptists and modern Baptists are examples originating in the 16th and 17th centuries respectively, while the Church of the Brethren is an 18th and the Disciples a 19th century instance, with other examples from other

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<sup>5</sup> See Karl Adam, *Das Wesen des Katholizismus*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1934); [originally printed in 1924] and Robert McAfee Brown, *The Spirit of Protestantism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961) for application of these themes to Protestant and Catholic forms of Christianity, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> See Winthrop Hudson, ‘Baptists Were Not Anabaptists,’ *The Chronicle* 16 (1953), pp. 171-179.

<sup>7</sup> See Gunnar Westin, *The Free Church through the Ages*, trans. Virgil A. Olson (Nashville: Broadman, 1958), Donald Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1968; [repr. Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1985]), pp. 8-16.

<sup>8</sup> See Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1899); Roland H. Bainton, ‘The Left Wing of the Radical Reformation,’ *Journal of Religion* 21 (1941), pp. 124-134; George Huntston Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962); John Howard Yoder, *The Ecumenical Movement and the Faithful Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1958); Durnbaugh, *The Believers' Church*; and my own essay, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., ‘What Is a ‘baptist’ Theology?’ *American Baptist Quarterly* 1 (1982), pp. 16-39.

centuries—perhaps the Hussite Chelčický movement in the 15th and the Pentecostal movement in the 20th century. On this view, what is vital is not that these movements influenced one another (though no doubt they sometimes did), but that under certain circumstances they took up in turn, in their own ways, a certain understanding of the gospel and of the Christian life. This baptist type is distinctive; it has its own role and destiny in the Kingdom of Christ. For historical reasons I find persuasive, I follow this third view, without denying that there is some truth in the other views.

This brings us to names. Some have called this movement the “Radical Reformation” (Williams) or the “Left Wing of the Reformation” (Bainton), but those names are purely historical, as is the name long favored by American Mennonite scholars, “Anabaptists,” while this last one is pejorative as well.<sup>9</sup> Newbigin has proposed the name “Pentecostal”; others have spoken of the “Free Church” (Littell) or “Believers’ Church” (Durnbaugh).<sup>10</sup> But “Free Church” means all things to all people, while “Believers’ Church” seems uncomfortably self-congratulatory. So I prefer “baptist” with a small *b*, to match “catholic” with a small *c* and “protestant,” small *p*. Yet if others choose another term than mine, I will not quarrel.

## II.

For my central task is not to provide it a name, but to call attention to this wider movement of which modern Baptists are only a part. The movement itself is the thing, and when from this point I speak the word “baptists” you should hear it with a little *b*, the equivalent of *Täufer*; I mean the entire movement, not any one instance of it. The task is to find the true, inner light of this movement, so that its pure color may (with others) make its contribution to the white light of God’s revelation in Christ.

Many suggestions have been made as to this distinctive light. From a longer list, consider these candidates for “the baptist vision.” First there is the *biblicist* proposal. Offered by many,<sup>11</sup> it is in essence this: The baptists of whatever century are the people of the Book. For example, the Swiss

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<sup>9</sup> “Anabaptist” is pejorative, since the term, meaning “baptizers-again” simply assumes what baptists with good reason deny—that infant ‘baptism’ is real baptism, and thus that subsequent believer’s baptism is superfluous and repetitive, a mistake repeated as recently as WCC 1982:4-6 [World Council of Churches, “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry,” Faith and Order paper. No. 111, the “Lima Text” (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), pp. 4-6], available electronically on <http://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/commissions/faith-and-order/i-unity-the-church-and-its-mission/baptism-eucharist-and-ministry-faith-and-order-paper-no-111-the-lima-text>], accessed 24 February 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Newbigin, *The Household of God*, Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Free Church* (Boston: Starr King, 1957], Durnbaugh, *The Believers’ Church*.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g., Donovan E. Smucker, ‘The Theological Triumph of the Early Anabaptist-Mennonites: The Rediscovery of Biblical Theology in Paradox,’ *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (1945), pp. 5-26.



Brethren, Blaurock and Grebel and Manz, Reublin and Brötli, were inspired by the biblical teaching of a priest named Zwingli. But when Zwingli counseled caution, these met in a private home to consider the Bible further. Then,

Dread began to come over them, yea, they were pressed in their hearts. . . . After the prayer, George Cajacob arose and asked Conrad [Grebel] to baptize him, for the sake of God, with the true Christian baptism upon his faith and knowledge. And when he knelt down with that faith and desire, Conrad baptized him. . . . After that was done the others similarly desired George to baptize them, which he also did. . . .<sup>12</sup>

Here, none could deny, was baptist practice; the proposal is that its core vision is biblicism. There is something right about this proposal, yet “biblicism” is not a winsome word. It smacks more of a narrow Fundamentalism than of the wide-ranging baptist vision, and it fails to distinguish the baptist *way* of approach to Scripture, its reading strategy. (For every Christian community has some place for Scripture.) We must look further into this.

But first, two alternative proposals: One sees a close connection between the baptist movement and *liberty*. Here the name “Free Church” becomes relevant. The Anabaptists were so feared and hated in 16th century Europe, not because in one or two cases they constituted a state church and defended their Münster or Oldeklooster with arms, but because in most places they rejected that link between civil and church government that had been at least a 1,200 year European tradition. This liberty, which we now seem to take for granted in the West, was dearly bought by suffering martyrs in the baptist movement. Hence Edgar Young Mullins, followed a little later by Ernst Troeltsch, understood liberty as the very essence of the baptist vision.<sup>13</sup> Mullins expressed this in his phrase “soul competency”—the capacity of the individual soul in all matters under God. He expanded this motto into a series of “axioms,” theological, political, ecclesiastical, and so on, that together expressed a viewpoint indeed baptist, but in the form of a rugged individualism perhaps better suited to the early 20th century’s liberalism (as exemplified by “Rough Rider” Theodore Roosevelt) than to the Kingdom of Christ. The liberty theme might yet be adopted and socialized by today’s Liberation Theology, but this is work remaining to be done, rather than an accomplishment I can report here.

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<sup>12</sup> The Hutterite Chronicle, as translated in George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 25 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957), pp. 39-46.

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Young Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion: A New Interpretation of Baptist Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1908); Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism and Progress: A Historical Study of the Relation of Protestantism to the Modern World*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Putnam, 1912, [repr. Boston: Beacon, 1958]); Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*.

The *communitarian* note (a third proposal) has been sounded by historical scholars working in the field of Anabaptist studies: Franklin H. Littell, Harold S. Bender, John Howard Yoder in particular.<sup>14</sup> These have seen the organizing vision as “a view of the church” (Littell), an “Anabaptist vision” of discipleship (Bender), a recovery of “the politics of Jesus” (Yoder). Discipleship does not mean solitary imitation of Jesus—that is a contradiction in terms. Jesus formed an alternative community, a different kind of community, and discipleship now means sharing in a community bound like his to the way of the cross.

A little reflection will show that the second proposal and the third, liberty and community, are each defective without the other. Community without liberty is oppressive; liberty without community is chaos. Where, then, is that vision that can bind these two into one? Let us return to the beginning. The authority of the Bible must be at least a clue: baptist confessions through the centuries have pointed to it. But how do baptists interpret the Bible? Not, I have already suggested, by an exact biblicist literalism; that is more characteristic of the Reformed movement than of baptists.<sup>15</sup> Such literalism caused great trouble when Reformed Puritans used it to apply Old Testament law to England and America; it creates a problem of another sort when a John Calvin finds (and imitates) one church order in the New Testament and in a later century an Eduard Schweizer finds another order there.<sup>16</sup>

Let me suggest, then, that the reading strategy of the baptist vision is a narrative one. This recognizes that the story now is continuous with the story then—but to say this is not enough; by such a rule, all heresies can be validated! Rather, *the story then is the story now; we are the disciples of the Gospel story; its Lord is our Lord; the Kingdom it proclaims is the Kingdom coming now.*<sup>17</sup>

This is the reading strategy that was employed already on the day of Pentecost, according to Acts 2. Psalm 16, Psalm 110, and Joel 2 are quoted there as testimonies to the crucified and risen Christ; the Hebrew Bible describes the ecstasy of the Pentecostal community. Intelligent Bible readers, in that day as well as this, must have known that if this was meant literally,

<sup>14</sup> Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: An Introduction to Sectarian Protestantism* (Hartford, Conn.: American Society of Church History, 1952); Harold S. Bender, ‘The Anabaptist Vision,’ in [Guy F. Hersherberger, ed.,] *The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1957). For Yoder, see his address [‘A People in the World: Theological Interpretation,’ published in James Leo Garrett, Jr., ed., *The Concept of the Believers’ Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1969)]; [cf. John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972)].

<sup>15</sup> Yoder, ‘A Clarification of Views of the Church.’

<sup>16</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles Library of Christian Classics, vols. XX-XXI, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960; originally 1599); Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament*, trans. Frank Clarke (London: SCM Press, 1961).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. McClendon, ‘What is a ‘baptist’ Theology?’; McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 27-35.

it was a mistake. The Psalms were celebrations of the faith in which they had been composed long before; Joel's vision of prophecy by sons and daughters, slave and free, young and old (2:28-31) was itself an application to his own day of the earlier teaching of Moses in Numbers 11 ('Would that all God's people were prophets, that all had the Spirit'<sup>18</sup>). What Joel had done in 400 B.C., Acts does again in the first century. To say "This" (what happens now) "is that" (what happened then) is not to deny the calendar or the facts of history, facts of which first century Jewish folk had a sophisticated awareness, thanks to their own great historians. But the meaning, the sense, of present events is transformed by placing them in a biblical frame.

The frame makes us see what the picture is. Hold up a picture frame before a living human being. Let it be a Florentine frame of the *cinque cento*—the high Renaissance. Now we may be in position to say, "this is that;" this living beauty is realized in a new way because of the old frame; today's subject, this living man or woman, is seen within the frame as the Renaissance artist might have seen them. Change the image, make it not a still portrait but a moving picture of the church now, let the frame be not Florentine but biblical, let it be not a mere border but a story in its own right, and you have the prophetic vision—I say the baptist vision—a way of seeing both Scripture and present community anew as one is seen through the lines of the other. That is the vision, understood here as a distinctive reading strategy for the people of God.

### III.

This reading strategy occurs and recurs in the chapters of the Bible. According to Amos, God says to the little nation whose capital was Samaria, 'I brought *you* up from the land of Egypt' (2:10, KJB). "Us? Why, that happened five hundred years ago. What has it to do with us now?" Or consider the Deuteronomist telling other parents how to be a parent. When your Jewish child says, "Papa, why do we have to keep all these rules?" tell him (Deut. 6:20-21, ESV), "We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, and the Lord brought us out." *We* were Pharaoh's slaves—as if that had happened to this very family, to us! Nor does the New Testament lack this prophetic vision—else what does it mean when Jesus asks the disciples, 'Who do men say that I am?' and they answer, 'John the Baptist, or Elijah, or Jeremiah?'<sup>19</sup> This is not reincarnationism. It is the prophetic vision, "this is that"; the problem the disciples faced was *how to get that vision right*.

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<sup>18</sup> [Numbers 11:29, KJV].

<sup>19</sup> [Mark 8:27, KJV and a paraphrase of 8:28]

Is it true, though, that this is also the baptist vision? If it is, it should illuminate that movement through its long and varied history, and it should interpret and bind together those other possible foci of the baptist vision, liberty and community, as well. To test this, consider four true stories. The first comes from the pages of Thieleman van Braht's *Martyrs Mirror*. In 1535 the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, issued an edict requiring that those who practiced anabaptism be brought 'to the most extreme punishment.' There was, happily, some discrimination: leaders must be burned to death, but mere members, if repentant, could be executed with a sword, and the women buried (alive, of course) in a pit. The next year, the alert bailiff at Zierichsee, in the Netherlands, arrested Peter Gerrits, Peter Joris, Peter Leydecker, and Johanna Mels. When these four were interrogated under the edict, they answered from the Bible, but the Burgomaster said, 'We care not for your Word of God, but hold to the mandate of the emperor,' warning the four that they faced death. Then they answered, 'Lord Burgomaster, by this you prove yourself to be a protector of the kingdom of Babel and of Bel for which you will indeed reap some reward here on earth, but hereafter, with antichrist and the crowned beast, eternal damnation in the lake of fire.' I would like to tell you that after they provided so insightful a diagnosis, the Burgomaster set these four young baptists free. Alas, it was not so; I spare you the details of their torture and death. 'Thus,' concludes *Martyrs Mirror*, 'they offered up their sacrifices.'<sup>20</sup> I would simply note that when their crisis came, the three Peters and Johanna held steadfast by their perception that "this is that"; their present peril could be understood only by reading the dramatic stories of the Old Testament and the New; they were Daniels in distress; their tormentors were the evil King Astyages and his god Bel. Thus disciples suffering in solidarity are supported by the baptist vision.

My next story is more cheerful, though not less moving. Eighteenth century English Baptists had nearly withered away under the reasoning of a systematic theologian named John Gill (1697-1771). Their hyper-Calvinism had led them to reject all effort to save the lost, since such effort contravened the primacy of God's electing decree. But a genius Northamptonshire shoemaker and preacher named William Carey dared to challenge that iron logic, and Carey became the means by which a missionary society was organized that sent him to India—the inauguration (1792-3) of modern missionary methods. Those facts are well known.<sup>21</sup> What is less well known

<sup>20</sup> See Thieleman J. van Braht, *The Bloody Theater, or Martyrs Mirror of Defenseless Christians*, trans. Josef F. Sohm (Scottsdale, Pa.: Mennonite Publishing House, 1951; originally 1660), pp. 442-444. The story of Astyages, Daniel, and Bel is found in the Septuagint version of the Book of Daniel, included in the Bible most 16th century baptists read.

<sup>21</sup> See e.g., Robert G. Torbert, *A History of the Baptists* (Philadelphia: Judson, 1978; originally 1950), pp. 103ff.

is that despite Carey's brilliance and eloquence, the society would hardly have been organized, or Carey sent, had not a neighboring pastor, Andrew Fuller of Kettering, supported Carey's proposal and backed it with his own solid argument. Now Fuller, being in this regard a man like Moses, was not eloquent. Yet Herbert Skeats, in his classic 19th century *History of the English Free Churches*, writes that in arguing for mission,

Fuller established his almost unrivalled power as a theological controversialist. Possessed of an intellect of extraordinary grasp and ability, which, by its sheer momentum, bore down with an irresistible force upon his opponents, and acute in detecting the smallest sophistries, he was a man whose sympathy and active aid were worth the assistance of troops of ordinary adherents.<sup>22</sup>

Fuller was opposed by ultra-Calvinists, Arminians, and Sandemanians, all of whom said he was utterly wrong, but he swept the field before him; the Society was subscribed, and Carey went to India.

What was the none-eloquent Fuller's secret? If we consult his classic sermon, "The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation," we find the now-familiar pattern. Fuller addresses the "this" of his earnest but mistaken listeners, mired in a rigid theology that taught preachers not to call sinners to repentance and faith (for that, they said, was "preaching the law"). To such a "this" he applies the corrective "that" of the practice of apostolic preaching as found in the New Testament. He declared:

We have, such a compromising way of dealing with the unconverted as to have well nigh lost the spirit of the primitive preachers; and hence it is that sinners of every description can sit so quietly as they do, year after year, in our places of worship. It was not so with the hearers of Peter and Paul.<sup>23</sup>

As I have told you, Fuller and Carey, pinning their argument (and staking their lives) upon that baptist vision of apostolic ministry, carried the day, and it is a reasonable inference that many latter day baptists (and this seminary) are here today only because they did.

Yet these narratives, chosen from a wealth of others, are not exceptional. I shall briefly remind you of just two more. One is the story of New England's Roger Williams (?1603-1683). Williams was surrounded all his life by Puritans who sought to use the Old Testament as a handbook for civil and church government—and used it as warrant to persecute those whose religion differed from their own. Williams answered, in a series of classic writings, that Old Testament theocracy was a *type*, completely fulfilled in Christ the King. Since that was so, he reasoned, we have in the

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<sup>22</sup> Herbert Skeats, *A History of the Free Churches of England from A.D. 1688-A.D. 1851*. 2nd ed. London: A. Miall, 1869), p. 510; see also A. C. Underwood, [*A History of the English Baptists* (London: Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland], 1947), pp. 161ff.

<sup>23</sup> Fuller, cited in Sydnor Lorenzo Stealy, ed., *A Baptist Treasury* (New York: Crowell, 1958), p. 93.

Old Testament no warrant for further fulfillment, far less imitation, of a manner opposite to Christ. Thus there can be no warrant in Old Testament kings and battles, or witch-burnings and persecutions, for any of these things in 17th century New England.<sup>24</sup> Thereby Roger Williams provided a control upon typology that can guide the baptist vision in every generation: Only in faithfulness to Christ and his way can we claim identity with his disciples. Our liberty is the gift of God; therefore it is presumptuous for governments, preempting God's place, to cancel those gifts. Thus Williams believed we dare not, dare not on the grounds of God's sovereignty, set up any part of our society in the place of God to rule over the human spirit; his doctrine of religious liberty was not a theory of human rights; it was merely a doctrine of the inability of men [*sic*] and their government to occupy the throne of Deity.

It may surprise some that I have sought to define the baptist vision without special reference to its name-giver, (believer's) baptism. Yet that has only been to save this paradigmatic case for last: Baptism is a *living* instance of this vision at work. For baptism, rightly practiced, is the prophetic sign of the convergence of two life stories, our Lord's and our own. In it, once again, "this is that." The "this" of my wayward journey is overtaken by the "that" of Jesus' ongoing narrative; in believer's baptism his story becomes my own as I become his; his hope, my hope; the life of the Kingdom is declared in this sign to be also my life; its Lord, my Lord.<sup>25</sup> Baptism is a commissioning ceremony.<sup>26</sup> It is the believer's 'ordination' as a minister or servant of the Lord. But that service is not to be different in kind from the way of service Jesus lived out in his own life of ministry. Thus, "this is that" means here the taking of Jesus' way to be my own way; the believer's baptism corresponds to, mystically *is*, Jesus' own baptism at the river Jordan; the acceptance of his grace as equipment for Kingdom tasks corresponds to Jesus' equipment by the Spirit of God on his baptismal day long ago.

Thus baptism paradigmatically shows how the vision embraces both the *liberty* that some have correctly seen it must presuppose and the *community* that others have correctly understood it must entail. For in

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<sup>24</sup> Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: [His Contribution to the American Tradition]* (Indianapolis: Bobbs Merrill, 1953), p. 85. Miller's interpretation of Williams was a recovery (with the work of others) of the biblical and Puritan in an age that had transformed Roger Williams into a modern liberal democrat. See LeRoy Moore, 'Roger Williams as an Enduring Symbol for Baptists,' *Journal of Church and State*, vol. VII/1 (Spring 1965), [pp. 181-189]. Subsequent discussion, however, has pointed out misleading aspects of Miller's own account.

<sup>25</sup> And what then of those who follow him but through historical circumstance are denied this mighty sign, who have the reality but lack the effectual emblem? Here the imagery of Pentecost speaks to us again; the Spirit is poured out on all the disciples, and "this" (our divided, often confused world of faith) is "that" (the Pentecostal scene, where unity and variety are alike the signs of the Spirit of God). How we long, though, for that eschatological fullness when others' gifts may be ours as well, while we can share with them believer's baptism and with the whole world of human need our vision, our fellowship, and our risen Lord.

<sup>26</sup> On baptism, see McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 255-59 and the literature cited there.

authentic baptism the freedom of God, God's liberty to be God for us, is graciously expressed precisely in the evocation of a free human response. The youth or adult who responsibly comes to this rite evinces a freedom for God that could provide the model of all human freedom, political, economic, artistic, intellectual. In his or her free yes to God, life begins anew. Yet that same sign initiates as well a life in community, a solidarity in the disciples' task that cannot be fulfilled in a lonely individual commitment to godliness, but requires the give and take of life together that is expressed in baptism's partner-sign, the Eucharistic meal. Here is baptism fulfilled in shared service and shared worship alike.

#### IV.

Our quest has been for an understanding of the baptist idea, its organizing theme or vision. The best expression of that idea will be one that incorporates other, partial expressions, yet displays the uniqueness of this distinctive baptist variety of Christian faith. The stories just retold point to the power of the baptist vision. When understood as "this is that," when understood, that is, as a scriptural reading strategy, this vision incorporates both liberty and community. The story of Roger Williams shows the theme of liberty dependent upon the baptist vision in which Christ only is Lord, God alone sovereign. The story of Andrew Fuller's persuasiveness reveals a false and in-turned sense of community—the easy contentment of the elect—in process of being overturned by that same apostolic vision, and thus issuing in a revolutionary, missionary sense of community that reached out to human need of the lost and sin-stricken in distant lands to include them as well in a redeemed community. The stories of the martyr-witnesses, on the other hand, do not seem to single out either liberty or community as such. In them, the martyr's note of costly witness dominates both the other elements, suggesting to the thoughtful reader that no liberty of choice, and no discipleship, is adequately Christlike if it lacks the yieldedness (*Gelassenheit*) of accepting unresistingly the world's enmity and cruelty. Yet that yieldedness itself will not be rightly read, save as the mirror of the Christ who takes up his cross to bear it and calls followers to take theirs, too. Their suffering is misguided or misconstrued if it be not Christ's own. So here supremely, *this is that*.

Two lessons come into view from this lookout place we have now gained. The first is theological: Those who have seen the center of baptist thought as biblical have not been wrong. The focus here is Scripture before it is anything else. Yet something more emerges. Not every reading of Scripture is a baptist reading; not every appeal to the Old or New Testament is a baptist appeal. Here is a distinctive reading strategy, itself exemplified

in Scripture, having the capacity to give a particular shape to the life of the people of God. Thus theology finds its task in the employment of this very strategy as a guiding hermeneutic for the discovery, understanding, and (God willing) the creative transformation of the convictions of a people who are themselves so guided, so shaped. This understanding of the theological task may comfort ‘conservatives’ to the extent that they rejoice in the centrality of the Bible; it may comfort ‘liberals’ to the extent that they delight in change in all earthly things; it should comfort neither to the extent that the baptist theological task calls into question the easy assumptions both parties make.

The other lesson returns us to the Pentecostal scene with which this essay began. Our task was to say what sort of self-understanding could do justice to Pentecost’s twin themes of variety and unity—‘the variety of tongues, peoples, responses to the Spirit, together with the unity of gospel and grace and God in resurrection light.’<sup>27</sup> The answer proposed here has sought to take church history with utmost seriousness. This means recognizing that the movement some have called Anabaptist, or Free Church, and here called baptist, is neither a mere deviation from some more central type of Christian life, some True Church, nor is it itself that True Church, all others having simply missed the way. To avoid both these wrong readings of history, it is necessary to state afresh the vision that identifies authentic baptist self-understanding, distinguishing it from other (catholic, or protestant) self-understandings. But that discrimination may have obscured for some the other Pentecostal concern: ‘They were all with one accord in one place’ (Acts 2:1b). The baptist vision fails if it does not point the way to Christian unity. Happily, it does point the way. God’s baptist people must often seem a motley bunch of followers of the Risen One. How can others see us as one if we do not even see ourselves in clear gospel light; how can we be of one accord with other Christians, if not even with one another? In reality it is this vision that has provided the profound unity we experience. And while other Christian types have much to teach us, much to share, we have this vision to share with one another and with them—that this is that, that the church now is the primitive church, that the Kingdom coming is the Kingdom now at hand.

\* \* \*

I address a closing word to my fellow (large B) Baptists. This interpretation of our fellowship is not a new or, I think, an alien one. It was Louie D. Newton who pointed out (in a time less ecumenical than our own) that the original conception of the Baptist World Alliance was of a broad and inclusive fellowship. He quoted the 17th century British General Baptist Thomas Grantham: ‘I could wish that all congregations of Christians of the

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<sup>27</sup> [See the opening paragraph of this essay.]



world that are baptized according to the appointment of Christ would make one consistory at least sometimes to consider *matters of difference* among them.’ And a century later, John Rippon, editor of the *Baptist Annual Register*, was sounding a similar note.<sup>28</sup> This wider understanding and dream of world fellowship was not fulfilled, however, in the Baptist World Alliance as it took form in 1905. Membership was then limited to ‘any general Union, Convention, or Association of *Baptist* churches.’<sup>29</sup> Yet the dream persisted, and it may point the way of obedience for Baptists in a coming day.

**The late Prof. Dr. James Wm. McClendon, Jr.**

Lastly he was a research scholar in residence,  
Fuller Theological Seminary, California

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<sup>28</sup> Louie D. Newton, ‘Baptist World Alliance,’ in *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists*, 4 vols., N. W. Cox, ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1958).

<sup>29</sup> Cited in Newton, ‘Baptist World Alliance’. Further evidence is found in J. H. Rushbrooke, *The Baptist World Alliance in Retrospect and Prospect* (London: Baptist World Alliance, 1920) and in the historical essay included in the *Proceedings: Baptist World Congress 1955*.

## THIS AS THAT: Friendly Amendments to James McClendon's "baptist" Vision

Barry Harvey

**Abstract:** This essay examines four discrepancies in the theology of James McClendon. First, his hermeneutical principle 'the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day' perpetuates a troublesome ambiguity in the univocal force that he attributes to the copula 'is'. Second, his claim that the 'is' is 'immediate' is also problematic, because it opens up the possibility of an unmediated connection to Jesus. Third, such an unmediated relationship does not treat adequately the fact that most Christians are Gentiles and not Jews. And finally, a question is raised about the project of denominational or confessional-specific theologies.

**Keywords:** James McClendon, baptist vision, real presence, Gentile believers, denominational theologies

James McClendon negotiates the many challenges faced by theologians at the end of the twentieth century with consummate skill and fidelity to the gospel. He demonstrates an uncanny ability to work *in medias res*, in the messy middle of a fallen and contentious world, framing a picture so winsome and persuasive it enlivens the imagination as it challenges the intellect. He reassembles the shattered fragments of Christianity's convictional discourse into a coherent whole, affording "baptists" a handle on what it means to worship truthfully and live faithfully before the One whom we confess to be the beginning and end of all things, love our sisters and brothers, and seek the good of our non-Christian neighbors.

The eminent position of McClendon in the ranks of Free Church theologians, but also among twentieth century theologians more generally, is secure, but he would not want us to codify his thought in ways that would place it beyond criticism. With that in mind, I explore what I take to be a discrepancy between what he shows us in the length and breadth of his *Systematic Theology*, the bulk of which I find compelling, and what he states methodologically about the distinctive character of baptist theology as expressed in the baptist vision. I offer these comments as a series of "friendly amendments" to his work.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Portions of this article have appeared in two previous essays, 'Doctrinally Speaking: James McClendon on the Nature of Doctrine', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27 (Spring 2000), pp. 39–60, and 'Beginning

My critique consists of four interrelated aspects. First, McClendon's hermeneutical principle, "the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day" and his motto, "this is that", perpetuate a troublesome ambiguity in the univocal force that he attributes to the copula "is." Second, his claim that the "is" is "immediate" is also problematic, because it could be read as complicit with the desire of our time for an unmediated connection to matters divine, a detour that many in our time take around what Walker Percy calls the 'Jewish-People-Jesus-Christ-Catholic-Church' thing.<sup>2</sup> Third, positing an unmediated relationship to the man Jesus of Nazareth bypasses too quickly the fact that most of us are Gentiles who were at one time strangers to the tempestuous conversation between God and Israel, but now participate in the eternal covenants made with the chosen people of Israel. And finally, I want to say a word about the project of denominational or confessional-specific theologies.

## The Mysterious "Is"

McClendon develops his account of Christian convictions around what he calls the baptist vision, a term that encompasses more than those groups that explicitly claim the title of Baptist. He unpacks this vision in a variety of ways, not all of which are equally helpful. In the first chapter of *Ethics*, for example, he defines it

... as a hermeneutical principle: shared awareness of the present Christian community as the primitive community and the eschatological community. In a motto, **the church now is the primitive church and the church on judgment day**; the obedience and liberty of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth is *our* liberty, *our* obedience, till time's end.<sup>3</sup>

He augments this identity of awareness with the phrase "this is that", which he borrows from the Authorised Version of the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles: 'But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel' (2:16). The author of Acts places these words in the mouth of Peter as the apostle explains the strange behaviour of Jesus's followers on that first feast of Pentecost after the resurrection: 'In the last days – the Lord declares – *I shall pour out my Spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young people shall see visions, your old people dream dreams.* (2:17, NJB).'<sup>4</sup>

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in the Middle of Things: Following James McClendon's *Systematic Theology*', *Modern Theology* 18 (April 2002), pp. 251–65.

<sup>2</sup> Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975), p. 140.

<sup>3</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Ethics*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), p. 30, McClendon's emphasis.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32, McClendon's emphasis.

Together these constitute the most well-known formulation of the baptist vision, but they are also the most problematic, for the hermeneutical challenge of following Christ in our time and place cannot be resolved by identifying ourselves *tout court* with those called by Jesus to follow him during his lifetime and with the church triumphant. Specifically, it is the assertion of identity in the “is” that needs to be rethought, in part because the way it functions in our discourse hides from us the mystery that is language itself. That said, there is a legitimate sense in which we may say that we in the twenty-first century share an awareness with the first believers and with those gathered at the right hand of God at the end of age. But the awareness we now have, and which is part and parcel of answering the call of Christ, both *is* and *is not* the awareness that is cultivated by the primitive and eschatological communities.

The gift and task of following Christ that the Holy Spirit communicates to us is not identical, first, to that of the first century. We live in a different time and place from that of the primitive church, which in its own time was never uniform, composed as it was at the beginning of an entirely Jewish membership, and only gradually were its ranks filled out with Gentile converts. Failure to take these differences sufficiently into account tends to view the life and ministry of Jesus in abstraction from historical and social setting, and thus from his first-century Jewish Galilean context, characterised among other things by acute forms of social deprivation, absentee landlords, an exploitive system of client kings, and intense sectarian rivalry between competing Jewish groups. All of these factors, and others besides, are constitutive of the particularity of the human person Jesus, and it is to this actual human being, not some docetic abstraction, that we look for our salvation.<sup>5</sup>

In his recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Gerhard Lohfink conducts an interesting thought experiment. He invites us to imagine for a moment that from the first day of his public ministry a hidden camera captured all that Jesus did, and a concealed microphone recorded his every word. What would we come to learn from this electronic record? Though we would come to know a great deal about many things, ‘we would know *nothing* of what really matters to Jesus, his mission, his task, the mystery of his person’. Without, for example, a thorough knowledge of the Old Testament and of the people who produced it, we would learn nothing of who Jesus was or what he was to accomplish. ‘Thousands of facts, in and of themselves’, Lohfink concludes, ‘are not history. History is interpreted event. Historical

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<sup>5</sup> John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006), p. 116.

knowledge organizes and interprets the infinite chaos of facts'.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Jesus, that interpretation cannot detour around the four evangelists, who in turn were dependent on eyewitnesses who also interpreted what they saw, and who in their turn drew on scripture for their interpretations.

Matters are only made worse by the persistent but misguided efforts over the last few decades to drive a wedge between the gospels and the Pauline epistles. Without Paul we would have virtually no idea of how the gospel about a Jewish man from first-century Galilee and Judea makes the momentous transition to a very different set of circumstances: an urban setting, organised modes of production, a well-developed legal system, a variety of intermediate social groups, and most significantly, a body of believers increasingly made up of Gentiles.<sup>7</sup> The whole canon of scripture, not just selected portions of it (for in that case scripture is no longer constitutive, only illustrative), provides the baseline interpretation of his existence. These are precisely the kind of differences that make a straightforward identification with the primitive community untenable as a hermeneutical principle.

The challenge of faithfully following Christ through the testimony of the scriptures, says Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is a thorny hermeneutical question that is not typically handled well by either self-identified conservatives or progressives. On the one hand he insists, with specific reference to the commands of the Sermon on the Mount, that the church cannot eliminate simple obedience to Jesus, for to do that transforms the costly grace of Jesus' call into the cheap grace of self-justification:

Fundamentally eliminating simple obedience introduces a principle of scripture foreign to the Gospel. According to it, in order to understand scripture, one first must have a key to interpreting it. But that key would not be the living Christ himself in judgment and grace, and using the key would not be according to the will of the living Holy Spirit alone.

The key that is often proposed, particularly by Protestants, is the struggle against legalism, which turns out to be the most legalistic attitude of all.<sup>8</sup>

When Christ commands his followers to be peacemakers, says Bonhoeffer, we are to take his command in a simple and straightforward manner. We misinterpret simple and straightforward obedience, however, if we imagine ourselves to be contemporaries of the Twelve. We cannot

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<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2012), pp. 10–11, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, *Discipleship*, trans. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), pp. 81–82.

identify ourselves with them as such, for they belong to revelation and thus to the proclamation of the word of God: ‘In preaching we hear not only Jesus’ answer to a disciple’s question, which could also be our own question. Rather, question and answer together must be proclaimed as the world of scripture’.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, says Bonhoeffer, the words of Jesus cannot be separated from faith in God’s becoming human in Christ and the reconciliation of the world accomplished by God in this fact, and transformed into a discrete set of principles such as pacifism or a preferential option for the poor and dispossessed, such that once we have these notions we no longer really need the one who proclaimed them.<sup>10</sup>

What we need is something like Rowan Williams’s description of the hermeneutical spiral that characterizes revelation, which presents us with a problem with respect to McClendon. One looks in vain for a discussion of this doctrine anywhere in his work—no detailed account of how individuals “know” God, no reasoned appeals to inspired texts or experiential depths, no extended discussion of the merits of “general” versus “particular” revelation. He reminds anyone troubled by its absence that this concept is not prominent in scripture, and when it does appear in the later tradition it is used to refer to a set of historical events that are attributed to God’s agency rather than to the natural and/or graced capacity of human beings to attain to eternal truths.<sup>11</sup>

All that is correct, and yet more needs to be said, for though the Greek term ἀποκάλυψις does not often appear in the New Testament, when it does it refers to what is at the heart of its witness: the interpretation of Christ’s life and passion as ‘the effective and definitive disclosure of God’s rectifying action’ in the midst of a fallen world.<sup>12</sup> This is an ongoing disclosure, says Williams, that ‘is bound up with memory and yet not simply specified by reference to a sealed-off past occurrence’. The rectifying activity of God that occurred in the past does not remain in the past, but it is enfolded in the power of the Holy Spirit in a process that draws all of human life and understanding through history into the divine activity.<sup>13</sup> Women and men are thus caught up into the Spirit-driven counterpoint initiated by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, bringing to naught the way things “have always been” and “always will be”, and fashioning in the midst of this time before the last

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<sup>9</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 6, *Ethics*, trans. Reinhard Krauss, Charles C. West, and Douglas W. Stott (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 229–30.

<sup>11</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Doctrine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 455; McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, *Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), p. 354.

<sup>12</sup> Philip G. Ziegler, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer—An Ethics of God’s Apocalypse?” *Modern Theology* 23 (October 2007), p. 581.

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), p. 135.

signs of a new creation, and with them a new set of relations between God and humanity, between humans, and between humankind and our non-human kin.

Our awareness as members of Christ's body is also different because between our time and place and those of the early church there are nearly twenty centuries and six continents of ecclesial development that contribute to this shared self-understanding in the Spirit, and which must be factored into our own interpretation of Christ, church, and the world. The question of following Christ cannot be posed in the abstract, says Bonhoeffer, but must be asked in the form of 'how Christ may take form among us *today and here*'.<sup>14</sup> Though the form of Christ is one and the same in every time and place, it is not possible to specify for all times and places the way this process of intellectual, moral, and spiritual formation takes place. Instead, our formation in Christ takes place in connection with what is at stake in the time and the place given to us as the domain of our decisions and our encounters. It is in this concrete context that we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, not just for ourselves, but also for the sake of the world.<sup>15</sup>

Our awareness of Jesus' call to discipleship is also different from that of the eschatological community because, unlike that gathering, we believe in the age to come and life everlasting, but live in this age as mortal beings. On that day we shall know as we are known, but now we see dimly, and therefore, unlike our sisters and brothers gathered around that heavenly throne praising God without ceasing, we must struggle in the twilight to discern the vital yet complex relationship, as McClendon describes it, between what lasts and what comes last,<sup>16</sup> or as Paul Lehmann puts it, 'the connection between the *course* and the *consummation* of human experience *in this world*'.<sup>17</sup> The terrain over which this journey to the consummation of this world and the revelation of the next is constantly changing, requiring continuous reassessment and response.

## **To Be and Not To Be**

In support of his claim that the church now shares an essential identity, rooted in consciousness, with the primitive and eschatological communities, McClendon adduces a comparison with the Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist:

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<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, p. 100, my emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 100–101.

<sup>16</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Lehmann, "Evanston: Problems and Prospects," *Theology Today* 11 (July, 1954), p. 149, emphases of Lehmann.

There the bread (and wine) upon the altar, when consecrated, *is* the body (and blood) of Christ. Not “represents” or “symbolizes,” but *is*. No lesser word will do. In the force of that “is” lies the power, the distinctive emphasis, of the Catholic doctrine...Now compare the claim made by the baptist vision: The church now *is* the primitive church; *we* are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to *us*.

The “is” in the baptist vision, he concludes, ‘is mystical and immediate; it might be better understood by the artist and poet than by the metaphysician or dogmatist’.<sup>18</sup>

It is true that the sort of imagination typically cultivated by artists and poets is needed to attend to the intersection of past and future that is, according the economy of redemption, the present. But as the perennial debates over the meaning of Jesus’ words over the bread and wine at the Last Supper testify, the status of the copula “is” in language is far from unambiguous. There is a mystery here even before we get to the comparison of the baptist vision to the Supper. The relation between the sign and the referent signified by the “is” represents the enigmatic threshold between sentient animals existing in an environment, and rational animals living, moving, and existing in an ordered and intelligible world. The sound we utter, the gesture we make, or the mark we inscribe on paper or computer screen both “is” and “is not” the reality we name by means of such sounds, such gestures, such marks.

With respect to the Lord’s Table, the signs of the bread and the wine mediate Christ’s real presence, his self-communication, to us in our present state, and therefore we truthfully say that the Supper “is” that self-communication. Indeed, given our fallen, failing, as yet un-resurrected bodies and our current powers of bodily communication, the presence of the risen Lord, the communication of his resurrected body to us in our time and place, requires mediation. The reality of the resurrection and the world to come can only appear in this age in the form of a sign. If the future were ontologically commensurate with present history, it would no longer be future, and these signs would no longer be needed to mediate Christ’s presence with us, for we could then see him ‘face to face’ (1 Cor. 13:12).<sup>19</sup>

The specific challenge here has to do with the caesura or temporal gap between ourselves and, on the one hand, the man Jesus who walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and on the other, the risen and ascended Christ. In his *pre-mortem* existence Jesus’ presence, his ability to communicate, to actively share the world with us, was limited by his

<sup>18</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 31–32.

<sup>19</sup> In what follows I am indebted to Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 63–67.



mortality to one time and one place. The resurrection simultaneously radicalised and intensified his embodiment, freeing him from the constraints of mortal existence while at the same time still allowing him to be involved in it.<sup>20</sup> When he was raised from the dead he was released from those limitations, and thus he was more present to his disciples when he ate fish with them, not less. He is more bodily present to us now in the Supper than he was to the Twelve before his death. But this presence also involves a real absence, because as he was, we are, and as he is now, we shall be but are not yet. In short, Christ both “is” and “is not” present in the Eucharist.

Considered in this context, the Supper “is” the presence of Jesus of Nazareth’s resurrected body insofar as the risen Lord can communicate via signs with our mortal bodies. This leads us to a second mystery related to this word “is”. Christ is not locally present in the same sense that the bread and wine, the material sign of Christ’s presence, are. Thomas Aquinas writes,

Christ's body is not in this sacrament in the same way as a body is in a place, which by its dimensions is commensurate with the place; but in a special manner which is proper to this sacrament. Hence we say that Christ's body is upon many altars, not as in different places, but ‘sacramentally’: and thereby we do not understand that Christ is there only as in a sign, although a sacrament is a kind of sign; but that Christ's body is here after a fashion proper to this sacrament.

We must take care not to confuse the material reality of the signifier and the formal character of the sign that communicates the divine presence. The force of the qualifier “real” is therefore not that of being materially in that place, because in its formal character the sign signifies Christ’s body and blood precisely insofar as they are also “absent”, the latter term defined by contrast to the material presence of the sign itself. Only the material sign is locally present, not the risen Christ, who, after all, is in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father.<sup>21</sup>

On this much Aquinas and those who reject the real bodily presence of Christ in the Supper agree. Ulrich Zwingli, for example, writes:

Observe, therefore, what a monstrosity of speech this is: I believe that I eat the sensible and bodily flesh. For it is bodily, there is no need of faith, for it is perceived by sense; and things perceived by sense have no need of faith, for by sense they are perceived to be perfectly sure.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984), p. 106.

<sup>21</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* IIIa.75.2; cf. IIIa.58.1., rev. ed., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1948).

<sup>22</sup> Ulrich Zwingli, *Commentary on True and False Religion*, eds. Samuel Mcauley Jackson and Clarence Nevin Heller (Durham, N.C.: Labyrinth, 1981), pp. 213–214.

The difference comes when Thomas asserts that the locally present signs of bread and wine *become* the body and blood of Christ, whereas for Zwingli he is present only in our commemoration of him. This means that the elements are the unequivocal sign of Christ's real absence, with the sign completely displacing what is signified, whereas for Thomas they form a dialectical and ironic sign of both his real presence and his historical and eschatological absence. The same one who walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and is now at the right of the Father is truly, really, bodily "there" in the Eucharist, but not as he was in Galilee two thousand years ago, nor as he is now and as he will be seen by us in the heavenly city, "face to face". He is "there" instead sacramentally, in the form of a mystery.

The dialectical and ironic meaning of the "is" in the liturgy also extends to the "is" in McClendon's "this is that". Because the age to come has intruded into the middle of history in the passion and vindication of Jesus, the past lives on and the future shapes the present. The life we now live in Christ "is" that of the primitive community and the eschatological community. At the same time, the social and historic shape of this point of intersection between these two ages is constantly changing, and therefore the life each generation of disciples' lives is also "not" the life of the primitive and eschatological communities. Past and future are thus at hand in the only way that the biblical past (which is irretrievable apart from the activity of the Holy Spirit) and the apocalyptic future (appearing mysteriously in the midst of the regularities around which the fallen world holds together) can be present—in the contingent form of a sign, namely, the church, which is the interpretive sacrament of union with God and of unity among humankind.<sup>23</sup>

McClendon implicitly modifies his "this is that" definition of the baptist vision in the second volume of *Systematic Theology*, describing it as a reading strategy for scripture. He appeals this time not to the Eucharist, but to the tradition of the figural and typological interpretation. This way of reading the Bible begins with the plain or literal sense as its dominant meaning and then seeks to discern the present in continuity with it, giving rise to the spiritual or theological sense, which is the point of the plain sense (which should not to be confused with what modern biblical criticism calls the historical sense<sup>24</sup>). McClendon rightly says that, 'Spiritual sense meant, not an abandonment or discarding of the plain sense, but its appropriation into the whole story of divine and human relations; it meant the way the plain words bore upon readers' lives in relation to all that God had done and would

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<sup>23</sup> Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium), p. 1, ([http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)), accessed 24 February 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God's Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 127.

do in their regard.’ This way of taking in the world ‘sees the past figurally present, and sees the future in terms of that present and past so joined’.<sup>25</sup> This is all to the good, though we need to reword his hermeneutical motto by one letter. Instead of “this *is* that”, I suggest “this *as* that”, with the “that”—a specific person, institution, ruler, or event in scripture—mediating our sense of the “this”, the persons, institutions, rulers, and events with which we in our time and place must now deal.

McClendon also says that the baptist vision is not only, or even primarily, a theory about how to read the Bible, but a name for the normative mode of Christian existence here *in medias res*. Again, all to the good, though I would add that in this mode of existence we *participate*, not just in Christian practices (which is true), and not just in the story of Jesus (also true), but first and foremost in the bodily self-communication of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Spirit. Protestants have tended to shy away from participation language until recently, opting instead for covenantal language that at times is difficult to distinguish from modern notions of contract (though these are not necessarily antithetical). Often the reason given is that it is too “Platonic”, which unfortunately has become what Americans call a bogeyman for a variety of positions that may or not be connected with either Plato or his intellectual heirs. When the early Christian authors drew on the Platonic tradition, it does not mean that they reasoned as Plato or Plotinus did. Far from “Hellenising” the gospel with the static concepts of Greek philosophy intruding on the dynamic nature of Hebraic revelation, these church fathers plundered concepts and modes of thought developed by the Platonists, Stoics, and Aristotelians, using this ‘Egyptian gold’<sup>26</sup> to explicate the testimony of Israel, Jesus, and the apostles when a crucial aspect of the church’s teaching was uncertain or contested. The idea that Greek philosophical categories are intrusions on the purity of the Bible’s Hebraic framework has outlived any usefulness it might have had. A more apt expression, as Robert Wilken writes, ‘would be the Christianization of Hellenism’.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of participation points to a two-way, asymmetrical relation between a participant (or participants) and a “participated”. Those who participate receive of, or take part in the participated, and that which is participated in gives of itself to the participants. Participants thus take or receive from this relation, the participated in gives or grants something to the participants, though this gift need not be conceived in corporeal terms. With

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<sup>25</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 36, 40, 92–94.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, II.60, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City, 1996), p. 160.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. xvi–xvii.

respect to the relation between creator and creature, participation is not a zero-sum game, as neither party is diminished by it, and participants substantially gain. The baseline of participation in this relationship is that of being, for everything that exists does so owing to its participation in God, which as Bonhoeffer puts it, preserves creation for its destiny in the new creation in Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Our participation in the mode of existence to which McClendon refers, and for which he offers such noteworthy figures as Sarah and Jonathan Edwards, Bonhoeffer, and Dorothy Day as exemplars, constitutes a non-identical repetition of the form of life that Jesus first communicated to the Twelve in Galilee and Judea (once again, this *as* that), and which the Spirit now communicates to us in the teaching of the apostles, the fellowship of the breaking of bread, and the prayers offered in worship (Acts 2: 42). It is a mode of life that is governed by a form of politics that privileges churchcraft over statecraft, which rejects the premise of necessary violence in defence of either the powers and principalities of the status-quo, or of revolution, and promotes truth-telling and the love of enemies as a viable way of ordering the world.<sup>29</sup> Lest we take this way of life too lightly, Bonhoeffer reminds us that this intimate yet asymmetrical relationship is a sharing in God's messianic suffering on behalf of the world.<sup>30</sup>

Because Christ is the same yesterday, today, and always, we participate in the being of the same crucified and risen Christ as the primitive community and the eschatological community. The ways that the one and same Christ communicates his form to us, however, differ to one extent or another in every time and place. The logic of historical existence, as Oliver O'Donovan observes, 'is that living in a given age means having a distinct set of practical questions to answer, neither wholly unlike those that faced other generations nor mere repetitions of them'.<sup>31</sup> Our participation in Christ thus generates an *analogical* instead of an identical awareness between the primitive and eschatological communities and ourselves.

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<sup>28</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, *Intellectual Appetite: A Theological Grammar* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), p. 78; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 3, *Creation and Fall: A Theological Exposition of Genesis 1–3*, trans. Martin Rüter and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>30</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, trans. Christian Gremmels, Eberhard Bethge, Renate Bethge, and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), p. 475.

<sup>31</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis: The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade, 2008), p. 45.

## Mystical and Mediated

McClendon further claims in *Ethics* that the “is” in his hermeneutical principle is ‘mystical and immediate’. Though the risen Lord’s self-communication to us is truly mystical, the claim that it is immediate does not follow. I have in mind here the seductive desire to be “spiritual but not religious”, that is, to be immediately in relation to the infinite and eternal, to *sense* God, to *feel* the divine presence, to *experience* grace and peace, without institutions, without scripture or tradition, and without rites and rituals. This appetite for an unmediated sense of God is not just theologically suspect, but idolatrous as well. We no longer think of our thoughts and affections as *responses* to the presence of God, for they have *become* that presence.

As Charles Taylor documents so exhaustively in *A Secular Age*, over the last five centuries the way we view the physical world has shifted from a cosmos whose structure and movement bears witness to the reality and glory of God, to a universe that is devoid of purpose and direction. Theologians and others worked diligently to find another place for God’s presence, and they thought they found it in the Enlightenment turn to the subject. The inner movements of the mind and affections were no longer *vestigia divinitatis*, but were set aside as the last refuge for the divine in a world no longer perceived as being grounded in mystery. We now strive by faith to discern God, not in the created order, but in an unmediated awareness of transcendence.

The only way to make sense of an unmediated experience of the ultimate is to posit a strange kind of transubstantiation, not of bread and wine on the altar, but of an individual’s interior life, becoming the substitute for a cosmos that ‘is no longer perceived as *spoken* by God’, having become ‘objectified...and detached from its supposed speaker’. The inner self is the stand-in for what the world once was: the image of the divine work of creation and redemption. The ‘interior mansion’, as Teresa of Avila puts it, is now the place where we attempt to secure a place for God in what otherwise seems like a meaningless universe, with the inner movements of thought and affection constituting that space.<sup>32</sup>

The problems with this picture are legion, perhaps the most pressing of which is how we are to assess what others “feel”, their “experience”.

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<sup>32</sup> Michel de Certeau, *Fable*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 188–89; Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1998), p. 69.

Consider the following, uttered by someone who was asked to describe the now notorious difference between “religion” and “spirituality”:

Well, religion, I feel, is doctrine and tradition, genuflecting, and you have to do things this way. Spirituality is an inner feeling, an allowance of however you perceive it in your world, in your mind, and however it feels is okay. This might be a little far out as an example, but the traditional picture of Jesus, the bearded man. Well, if you picture him in a different way, that’s okay. There’s not these parameters [sic] on it.<sup>33</sup>

Mediation in our relations with the triune God *and* with one another is mandatory, not an option. Thinking of ourselves as somehow immediately at one with those called by Jesus during his mortal life cannot adequately determine the shape and substance of discipleship for our day and place. Those who were in the company of the Lord during the days of his earthly existence, writes Bonhoeffer, ‘belong to the word of God and thus to the proclamation of the word. In preaching we hear not only Jesus’ answer to a disciple’s question, which could also be our own question. Rather, question and answer together must be proclaimed as the word of scripture’.<sup>34</sup> First of all, then, we are dependent for our relationship to the crucified and risen Lord on the testimony and the teaching of the apostles, who were his witnesses from the beginning, and who in turn drew on the law and the prophets. The whole canon of scripture is the primary interpretation of Christ’s presence.

Second, because Christ promises to be present where two or three are gathered together, each also mediates his presence to the others, thus taking up and extending a process that marks our essential character. As Bonhoeffer describes it, human persons do not exist as isolated, ‘unmediated’ entities (as if we were gods), but as historically extended, socially embodied, and geographically located beings. To be a person is to live, move, and have our being ‘over-against-one-another, with-one-another, and in-dependence-upon-one-another’.<sup>35</sup> Others thus comprise a porous barrier to our composition as persons, and therefore to be a person is to be both structurally open and closed. Open, because thinking, self-conscious willing, and feeling only happen from and within sociality, communicated chiefly in and through language; closed, because the personhood of each is not dissolved into a sea of surrounding spirits, but properly retains its own irreducible unity and integrity (though tragically this is too often violated). The structure of the social body ‘only becomes visible in the individual intention to action’, while

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<sup>33</sup> Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 137.

<sup>34</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, p. 82.

<sup>35</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 64.

personal intention is intelligible only as we see it arising from, with, and in human sociality.<sup>36</sup>

But the work of mediation does not stop there, for as heirs in Christ our faith is mediated not just by those we meet face-to-face, but also by two millennia of fellow heirs whose lives and testimonies also serve to convey God's presence and activity. Free Church believers have often struggled with the notion of belonging to a tradition, especially when it is made up not just of ideas, but also of the lives, the sweat, and too frequently the blood of those who have gone before us. If we think of tradition as only a set of ideas we reduce it to the status of a restaurant menu from which we are free to order something from columns A and B, but nothing from column C.

Finally, positing an unmediated relationship to the man Jesus of Nazareth does not take sufficient notice of the fact that most believers are Gentiles who at one time were strangers to the tempestuous conversation between God and Israel, but now, solely by God's gracious initiative in Christ, we have been swept up into the eternal covenants made with the chosen people. It unwittingly perpetuates the displacement of the Jews from the inheritance of Christ, which has been an open wound in the long history of the church. We have too often forgotten, in a centuries-long fit of self-induced amnesia, that it is a first-century Jewish man in whom the reality of God and the reality of the world have been united, and to whom we bear (often woefully imperfect) testimony. It is in relation to *this* person, together with his people, their land, and their God, encompassing a mountain in the wilderness, a royal city, a stable, a carpenter's shop, a well in Samaria, and a hill with three crosses, that we find our true identity. Sadly, the awareness we share with brothers and sisters past and present has far too often been formed by supersessionist theologies that locate it, as Willie Jennings puts it, 'outside Israel, outside the conversation between biblical Israel and its God, outside the continuing conversations living Israel has with the same God'.<sup>37</sup>

Several aspects are involved here, says Jennings, the first being the recognition that as Gentile readers of Israel's scripture, we must read the Old Testament as first and foremost the story of Israel, the physical offspring of Abraham and Sarah, through whom God promises to bless all humankind. Though we narrate it differently than Jewish exegetes do, it is still Israel's story, and it must remain so, because only in that way can it possibly become our story as Gentiles grafted on the cultivated branches of God's chosen ones. Second, we can never forget that we have been invited to read this story

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<sup>36</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 1, *Sanctorum Communio: Theological Study of the Church*, trans. Reinhard Kraus and Nancy Lukens (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), pp. 50–51, 67 n. 3; Bonhoeffer, *Creation and Fall*, p. 64.

<sup>37</sup> Willie James Jennings, *Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 251–52, 292.

solely as a result of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a member of the people of Israel. It is Jesus who allows us to eavesdrop, as it were, on the conversation going on between God and this nation. Third, ‘we are Gentile readers who should perceive living Israel through the lens provided by biblical Israel’. In other words, God remains faithful to the covenants with Israel. God does not finally dispose of the chosen ones. And finally, as I have already suggested, as Gentile readers we interpret our own existence through the lens provided by the particularities of the Jewish Jesus. These closely coordinated angles of vision all presuppose that we need to learn again to see the world and ourselves mediated from within the place established for us by God within the people of Israel.<sup>38</sup>

## Do We Need More “*baptist*” Theologies?

McClendon acknowledges from the outset that the project of a baptist theology is a concession to the fact that at present, ‘Christianity itself is not one congruent whole’,<sup>39</sup> and that this is part of what it means to do theology in the middle of what the American philosopher William James calls the blooming, buzzing confusion that is our world. He states that his aim is not to write a “denominational” theology, or to claim that the heritage of Radical Reform is the one true church or confession. His concern is that this segment of Christian believers has been under-represented in recent theology, and thus he seeks to locate the place of this tradition on the contemporary theological landscape while recognising that ‘such self-location can be isolationist and harmful. The mode of Christian faith that is the referent here, like any other mode, is finally of value only if it will make its contribution to all God’s people’. His hope is that their witness to the one Christ will at least be acknowledged alongside the others, but ‘they cannot expect this to happen until their own witness is theologically clear’.<sup>40</sup> McClendon is exactly right in saying this, and yet we cannot leave the matter there, for if we do such efforts could be seen as justifications for leaving the current, fragmented state of the church and theology as they are.

How then do we resist the inertia that results in a type of *curvatus in se* which can so easily accompany a concentration on one thread in the whole cloth of the Christian tradition? This is a particularly pressing question to ask in an era in which recognisable denominational or sectarian identities have broken down. Many Baptists in North America have reacted in one of two ways to the fragmentation of these traditions: engage in a desperate bid to shore up the crumbling walls of identity, or stand by as the solvents of the

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<sup>38</sup> Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 252.

<sup>39</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 9.



age strip away all distinguishing marks and leave us only the banal and the trivial. It is in this respect that we seek to take up McClendon's project and go on and go further with it, though in a somewhat different direction. The question that I wish to ask is not, what does it mean to be baptist? which McClendon, Curtis Freeman, and others have investigated. Instead I ask, what does it mean for baptists to align ourselves visibly with our fellow Catholic Christians confronting the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century church?

A recently released report of a series of conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity of the Catholic Church, entitled *The Word of God in the Life of the Church*,<sup>41</sup> helpfully sets forth points of convergence and divergence in matters of doctrine, scripture, liturgy, and polity between the two groups. It carefully articulates not only what binds the two groups together in Christ, but also what separates us, a division that vitiates not only spiritual lives and our calling to offer ourselves as living sacrifices to Christ, but also renders any attempt to do theology very difficult if not impossible. If we are to do theology in the context of a divided church, says Robert Jenson, we must do so as those who confess that 'we live in radical self-contradiction and that by every churchly act we contradict that contradiction. Also theology must make this double contradiction at and by every step of its way'.<sup>42</sup>

Those involved in the consultation did good work, but where should we go from here? I submit that we now should to consider, simply consider mind you, the possibility that in our dissent against the "papists" over the centuries we may too often have thrown the baby out with the bath water. We should ask whether our wholesale rejection of an authoritative magisterium and dismissal of the efficacy of the sacraments may, just may, have been imprudent, that what was appropriate in one setting (e.g., the critique of infant baptism in seventeenth century England, which basically signified that you were a subject of the crown and little more) may not be as pertinent in other settings. We should to ask whether true and faithful dissent can just pick up where the sixteenth century reformers left off and assume that we are on the right track, or treat the first four centuries of the church like the track used in the track and field event of the broad jump, building up speed and then taking off after Augustine's death, leaping over the entirety of the Middle Ages and landing safely in 1517?

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<sup>41</sup> *The Word of God in the Life of the Church: A Report of International Conversations between the Catholic Church and the Baptist World Alliance, 2006-2010* (Falls Church, Virginia/ Roma: Baptist World Alliance and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, 2013, Kindle Edition) – Ed. Note.

<sup>42</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1. *The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. vii.

I am suggesting that we should set aside our distinctive convictions as baptists, which if McClendon is correct is not even a possibility, if indeed convictions are those ‘persistent beliefs such that, if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before’.<sup>43</sup> We neither choose our convictions nor dismiss them by a sheer act of will. For a variety of reasons (good, bad or indifferent) women and men must be *convinced* to change their persistent beliefs. But if we ignore McClendon’s warning and set as our task the formulation of a denominational or confessional theology, regardless of whether it is baptist or Reformed or Lutheran or evangelical, or conservative or progressive, we deprive oneself not only of crucial insights from the larger Catholic tradition (including the church in the East), but more importantly of critically sympathetic interlocutors who are vital if all of us are to live faithfully and speak truthfully in a post-denominational, post-Christendom world. (I would include in this category of denominational theology Catholic theologies that define “Catholic” as over against what is deemed “Protestant”.)<sup>44</sup>

What I am proposing is that we hold our allegiance to Christ and to the Church Catholic tightly (though not so tight that we choke the life out of them), and our baptist convictions somewhat more loosely. In our engagements with voices and positions other than our own we should refuse to take either a siege mentality or a “you have your view, we have ours” stance. We should instead seek in our deliberations with other Christians, or at least with those whose convictions display the kind of substance worth engaging (itself a judgment call), either *to persuade or be persuaded*. Like jurors deliberating the fate of a fellow citizen, our task and calling in Christ is to come to one mind, while at the same time insisting that each voice must be heard and each mind convinced before we can truthfully say that we are of one accord. As the good book says, ‘It is good that you should take hold of the one, without letting go of the other; for the one who fears God shall succeed with both’ (Eccl. 7: 18, NRSV).

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<sup>43</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994), p. 87.

<sup>44</sup> An excellent resource in this regard is Paul Murray, ed., *Receptive Ecumenism and the Call to Catholic Learning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

## Carrying out the Theological Task in a Baptist Way

Parush R. Parushev

**Abstract:** This essay affirms James McClendon's claim that baptistic communities, of which the Baptists are a representation, constitute a distinguished form of Christian life with distinct hermeneutics of the biblical narrative guided by a particular vision—the baptistic vision. This vision provides necessary and sufficient scope for an authentic baptistic theology to take shape. The baptistic way of theologising is defined as communal, convictional, and contextual. The vector of theologising takes its direction from the lived-out or primary theology of the gathering, intentional, convictional community and points to scholarly theological discourse.

**Keywords:** McClendon, baptistic vision, convictional theology, perspectivism, primary theology

The aim of this paper<sup>1</sup> is to reflect on a Baptist, and more generally on a baptistic way, of being a distinct Christian community, as well as to honour the academic inauguration of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre's collaborative partnership with the Faculty of Theology of the Free University, Amsterdam.<sup>2</sup> The claim made in this paper is that the baptistic

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<sup>1</sup> Some material of this paper was originally presented as a keynote lecture, 'Doing Theology in a Baptist Way [Theologie op een baptistenmanier]' and discussed at the Jubilee Symposium on 400 years of the Baptist Movement, 1609-2009 [Jubileum Symposium 400 jaar Baptisme, 1609-2009] and on the occasion of the academic inauguration of the Dutch Baptist Seminary joining the academic community of the Faculty of Theology at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam on 01 January 2009. The Symposium on the theme of *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* was organised jointly by the Centre for Evangelical and Reformation Theology, VU and the Baptisten Seminarium in Amsterdam, the Netherlands 16 April 2009. The lecture, together with the discussion papers, was made available to the participants in a collection of essays with limited circulation edited by Teun van der Leer, *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way: The Plenary Papers Collection of the Symposium* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2009, in English and Dutch), pp. 1-33. An edited and expanded version of the lecture with the title 'Theologie op een baptistenmanier' is published as a chapter in a collection of research papers in Teun van der Leer, ed., *Zo zijn onze manieren! In Gesprek over gemeentetheologie*, Baptistica Reeks, vol.1 (Barneveld, Nederland: Unie van Baptisten Gemeenten in Nederland, September 2009, in Dutch), pp. 7-22 and 66-75. I want to express my gratitude to my colleagues Dr Keith G. Jones, Dr Ian M. Randall, Prof John H.Y. Briggs, Dr James G.M. Purves, and to the Dutch Baptist scholars, Dr Teun van der Leer and Prof Dr Henk Bakker, for the careful reading and critical comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The collaborative partnership agreement was signed on 12 June 2013. Article 1 of the agreement specifies that the two institutions 'wish to collaborate to the greatest extent possible in the field of education, research and community service in Theology and Religious Studies'. It further envisions that IBTS Centre will be situated in the Faculty of Theology of VUA as of 01 September 2014 and that the 'collaboration primarily

form of Christian life, of which the Baptists' congregational life is a representation, has a distinguished character. If this is so, there must be also a distinctive way of *doing* baptistic theology. Given that, holding to a common vision–baptistic vision, which defines a baptistic hermeneutical perspective of shared identity, does not preclude contextual peculiarities of baptistic theologising.

The argument of the paper unfolds in the steps delineated above by looking first at the distinctive Baptist/baptistic way of being a Christian community. It progresses by probing into the essence of the baptistic hermeneutical approach and investigating the baptistic understanding of the nature of the theological task, not as building up a unique theological system, but rather as an exercise in convictional theologising. This type of theology accepts shared convictions as the 'stuff' of theological investigation; it proceeds from primary theological awareness of the lived-out beliefs of a community of faith to their scholarly or second-order assessment. Finally, the ambiguity of baptistic particularity is examined and a way of doing baptistic theology is clarified. Considering the occasion, some didactic elements are also included in the content of the paper.

## The Baptist Way of Being a Christian Community

I want to suggest that, while Baptists with a capital 'B' may claim specific historic beginnings in early seventeenth-century Britain and the Netherlands,<sup>3</sup> their way of being Christian is not uniquely Baptist. It has been

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involves providing the opportunity to PhD students of IBTS Centre to obtain their doctoral degree through VUA at the Faculty of Theology of VUA, as well as jointly conducting research'. The first group of IBTS Centre doctoral students was officially registered at the Faculty of Theology at the end of June 2013. The academic co-operation of IBTS Centre and VUA started with the joint sessions of the 2013 Nordenhaug Lecture Series delivered by Dr Cathy Ross (Oxford University). The academic inauguration of IBTS Centre was celebrated jointly with the Hughey Lecture Series delivered by Prof Dr Curtis Freeman (Duke University) and followed by the *Convictional Theologies* conference, 03-06 November 2014, VUA-IBTS Centre, Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Papers presented at these events are published in this and in the following issues of *Baptistic Theologies*.

<sup>3</sup>The debate about the origins of the Baptists is still going on. For subsequent reflections I am in debt to Prof Briggs' comments and suggestions. One school of historians holds the view that Baptist life originated in the Netherlands in close association with the Waterlander Mennonite communities in early 1600s (e.g. Ernest Alexander Payne in the UK and William R. Estep and Glen H. Stassen in the USA). There is another school of historians who believe that Baptists have their roots in English separatism or extreme leftward Puritanism (e.g. Winthrop S. Hudson in the USA and Barrie R. White in the UK). Those who take the latter line are likely to emphasise the relationship of the Baptists with English Congregationalists rather than Dutch Mennonites. In the nineteenth century there was considerable anticipation of the amalgamation of the two streams of Congregational life in the UK articulated by people like John Clifford. In 1862 and 1900 the two denominations symbolically held united assemblies. For an overview of the nature of the debate, see Ian Sellers, 'Edwardians, Anabaptists and the Problem of Baptist Origins', *The Baptist Quarterly*, the Journal of the Baptist Historic Society in the UK, Vol. XXIX, No. 3 (July 1981), pp. 97-112, and Kenneth R. Manley, 'Origins of the Baptists: The Case For Development from Puritanism-Separatism', in William H. Brackney with Ruby J. Burke, eds. *Faith, Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990* (Birmingham, Ala.: Samford University Press, 1990), pp. 56-69. For a brief review of the origins and of the spread of the Baptist movement, see James Leo

argued persuasively by theologians and historians alike that the Baptist marks of ecclesial identity<sup>4</sup> are shared by a wide variety of groups with a strong family resemblance. These groups together form a major stream of being Christian, a people of God following in the steps of the Radical Reformation.

Bishop Lesslie Newbigin admitted half a century ago that ‘it is difficult to give a single name to this stream of Christian tradition’,<sup>5</sup> and yet it does have, according to him, a robust manner of ‘ingrafting into Christ’ having been incorporated into the Body of Christ by ‘receiving and abiding in the Holy Spirit’<sup>6</sup> on an equal footing with traditionally recognised catholic (and orthodox) and protestant communions. He named it the ‘pentecostal’ (with a small ‘p’) stream, without too close an association with the group of

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Garett, Jr., editor-in-chief for the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance, *We Baptists* (Franklin, Tenn.: Providence House Publishers, 1999), pp. 1-18.

Significantly for the argument of this paper, the two denominations have tended to diverge theologically in the twentieth century, with the Baptists favouring conservatism in their evangelicalism and caution in their approach to the Scriptures, whilst the Congregationalists have been friendlier to liberal theological positions. The differences became even more evident in polity and ecclesiology as the Congregational Union became the Congregational Church. Thus, the expression of ecclesial identity was moved from the local congregation to the national body. This step naturally evolved into the Congregational Church joining with the English Presbyterians to form the United Reformed Church—a union on the basis of theology rather than ecclesiology. In so doing, the Congregationalists joined with a church that had a strong Protestant and ethnic identity with relationship to diaspora Scots. It is significant today that the United Reformed Church tends to form partnerships with European Landeskirchen by being a full member of the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe. Baptists in the UK, on the other hand, identify with evangelical (in the European sense of the word) minorities. Following Prof. Dr. Paul Fiddes, I will take on the notion of identification later in this paper.

Reviewing the historic origins of the Baptists, one must take note of the third strand to Baptist life in continental Europe, for most of its churches are neither the offshoots of Dutch/Swiss Anabaptism nor British Puritanism, but have their roots in indigenous revivalism, particularly Pietism, and therefore are much less conscious of the covenant nature of the church or the social responsibility of its members than their counterparts in the British Isles. Pietism (as later Charismatic renewal movements within established churches) is an interesting phenomenon, existing as it has done with its own structures within those of the Landeskirchen as a kind of safety valve allowing those touched by ‘enthusiasm’ not to separate from the church. Sometimes the tension between the revivalist and mainstream groups becomes too great and then revivalism/Pietism turns into a nursery out of which various free-church movements have emerged. For further details see Parush Parushev and Toivo Pilli, ‘Protestantism in Eastern Europe to the Present Day’, in Alister E. McGrath and Darren C. Marks, eds., *The Blackwell's Companion to Protestantism* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), pp. 155-60, and Ian M. Randall, *Communities of Conviction: Baptist Beginnings in Europe* (Praha [Prague]: EBF/Erlangen, Germany: Neufeld Verlag Schwarzenfeld, 2009). Accounting for diversity among baptistic movements, one may find helpful Dr. Payne’s insightful observation that: ‘Ideas had legs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as they have today’. (See his ‘Who Were the Baptists?’ *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XVI, No. 8 (October 1956), p. 340 (pp. 339-342)).

<sup>4</sup> Identity is a contested concept. The topic of Baptist identity has been the subject of numerous discussions, particularly in the years preceding and immediately following the celebrations of the 400-year jubilee anniversary of organised Baptist life in Europe and around the globe. Discussions culminated at the European Baptist Federation’s Assembly *Amsterdam 400: Celebrating 400 Years Baptist Life* held in the surroundings of the RAI Centre in Amsterdam on 24-26 July, 2009, followed by the Jubilee Annual Gathering of the BWA *Celebrating 400 years of the Baptist Movement* in Ede, The Netherlands, 27 July 27-01 August 2009.

<sup>5</sup> *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954, 1953), p. 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

denominations that bear that name. James Wm. McClendon, Jr. a prominent North American Baptist theologian, suggested the name ‘baptist’ with a lower case ‘b’ for this stream. Recently the term ‘baptistic’ became widely accepted.<sup>7</sup> After surveying a number of settings of Baptist expression in Europe, particularly in Central and Eastern Europe, a research team at IBTS came into agreement on the following descriptor for this way of giving expression to the Christian faith:

By ‘baptistic’ is meant those of the free church and believers’ baptism tradition. This term is used as an umbrella term for a variety of believing communities (‘gathering’ churches) practising believers’ baptism, and demanding radical moral living, such as [Anabaptists,] Baptists or Pentecostals. It can also include a number of other groups in the regions, such as Adventists and [Mennonite] Brethren. (There is an overlap with the use of the term ‘Evangelical’ in the Central and Eastern contexts—sometimes in denominational names). It excludes churches in which members think in terms of ethnicity or geographical and political boundaries and in which people typically baptise their children into these ethno-geo-religio-identities. That is, ‘baptistic’ excludes traditionally state sponsored ecclesial bodies.<sup>8</sup>

In this paper I will use the term ‘baptistic’ when referring to the ‘pentecostal’ stream as a whole and I will reserve the term ‘Baptist’ for referring to the particular Baptist expressions within that stream in the dynamic relationship of ‘one of many’ and ‘one for many’.

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<sup>7</sup> For the origination of the terms ‘baptist’, ‘baptistic’, see James Wm. McClendon, Jr., ‘The Believers Church in Theological Perspective’, in Stanley Hauerwas et al., eds, *The Wisdom of the Cross: Essays in Honor of John Howard Yoder* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), pp. 309-326 and Lina Andronovienė and Parush Parushev, ‘Church, State, and Culture: On the Complexities of Post-Soviet Evangelical Social Involvement’, *Theological Reflections, EAAA Journal of Theology*, #3 (2004), pp. 194-212. Cf. McClendon’s earlier account of the theological heritage of baptistic (or ‘baptist’) communities published in this issue and in *Ethics: Systematic Theology, Vol. I*, rev. ed. published posthumously (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 1986; reprint, Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012), pp. 17-34 (page citations are to the reprint edition). For a collection of writings produced from a baptistic perspective since the beginning of the fifteenth century, see Curtis W. Freeman, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., and C. Rosalee Velloso da Silva, comps., *Baptist Roots: A Reader in the Theology of a Christian People* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Press, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev, ‘Editors’ Preface’, in Rollin G. Grams and Parush R. Parushev, eds., *Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity: Listening to the Churches in Armenia, Bulgaria, Central Asia, Moldova, North Caucasus, Omsk and Poland* (Prague: IBTS Publisher, 2006), p. 10. Keith G. Jones developed the understanding of a Baptist/baptistic congregation as a gathering, intentional, convictional, and porous *koinonia*, in counter position to a gathered, voluntary, doctrinal, and closed congregation, in his essays ‘Towards a Model of Mission for Gathering, Intentional, Convictional *Koinonia*’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4:2 (January 2004), pp. 5-13; and ‘On Abandoning Public Worship’, in Keith G. Jones and Parush R. Parushev, eds., *Currents in Baptistic Theology of Worship Today* (Prague: IBTS Publisher, 2007), pp. 7-23. Cf. Parush R. Parushev, ‘Gathered, Gathering, Porous: Reflections on the Nature of Baptistic Community’, in a *Festschrift* collection of papers for Dr. Keith Jones in *Baptistic Theologies* 5:1 (Spring 2013), pp. 35-52.

I have argued elsewhere the case for identifying distinctive hermeneutical, ecclesiological, and missional perspectives among communities<sup>9</sup> of baptistic Christians.<sup>10</sup> In their understanding,

God is known by what he does in their midst. By constructing new ways of social living they succeed in conveying, non-abrasively, the power of God to create anew in those and through those who are united to Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). Stressing the immanence of God, they see themselves embodied in the narrative of the Kingdom of God revealed in and through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

Reviewing different proposals offering descriptive expressions of baptistic life and practice made by historians, philosophers, and theologians, McClendon identifies at least five theological distinguishing marks or experiential senses of being a baptist (note the small ‘b’)<sup>12</sup>: a) the stress on the use of biblical story as trustworthy guidance for both faith and practice and as effecting a direct narrative link between the present community with the communities of the apostles, making the biblical story the baptist’s own; b) the freedom of conscience as God’s gift to a believer or to a faith community to congregate voluntarily, to respond to God without interference of the state or other power structures, including the structures of institutional religion, and ‘to live without violence in a violent age’<sup>13</sup>; c) the following of Jesus’ way in mutual submission to the care of the community of disciples under the Lordship of Christ (much as with the Christ-centred *Nachfolge*

<sup>9</sup> The notion of community is prominent in current theological discourse, but is used in a variety of ways that can obscure the meaning of the term. Elsewhere I have considered the use of the notion in critical divergence from the definition offered by William Sweet. See Parush R. Parushev, ‘Convictions and the Shape of Moral Reasoning’, in Parush R. Parushev, Ovidiu Creangă, Brian Brock, eds., *Ethical Thinking at the Crossroads of European Reasoning* (Prague: IBTS Publisher, 2007), IBTS Occasional Publications Series, volume 7, pp. 33-34 (pp. 27-45), revised and republished as a chapter on ‘Patterns of Academic Reasoning’, in Parush R. Parushev, Rollin G. Grams and Lina Andronovienė, *Academic Reasoning, Research and Writing in Religious Studies: A Concise Handbook*, foreword by Dr Keith G. Jones, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., rev. and enl. (Prague: IBTS Publisher, 2014), pp. 5-19. On Sweet’s definition, see his ‘Religious Belief, Political Culture and Community’, in Alice Ramos and Marie I. George, eds., *Faith, Scholarship and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, American Maritain Association Publications, ed. Anthony O. Simon (Washington, D.C.: American Maritain Association/Catholic University of America Press, 2002), p. 300 (pp. 297-311). For the understanding of community followed in this work, see footnote 16.

<sup>10</sup> Parush R. Parushev, *Christianity in Europe: The Way We Are Now* with a response by Vija Herefoss, Crowther Centre Monographs Series, Volume 9 (May 2009) (Oxford, UK: Church Missionary Society, 2009); Idem, ‘Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics’, in Helen Dare and Simon Woodman, eds., *The Plainly Revealed Word of God? Baptist Hermeneutics in Theory and Practice*, The Watson-Brown Foundation, Inc. Endowed Series in Baptist Studies (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2011), pp. 172-190; Idem, ‘Convictional Perspectivism: A Constructive Proposal for a Theological Response to Postmodern Conditions’, in John Currie and Cathy Ross, eds., *Mission in Context: Explorations Inspired by Andrew Kirk* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 111-124; and Idem, ‘Gathered, Gathering, Porous’.

<sup>11</sup> Parushev, *Christianity in Europe*; cf. Parush R. Parushev, ‘A Baptist’s Perspective on the Ecumenical Plurality of Missional Witness to the Way of Christ’, in Bernd Jochen Hilberath et al., eds., *Ökumene des Lebens als Herausforderung der wissenschaftlichen Theologie/Ecumenism of Life as a Challenge for Academic Theology* (Frankfurt: Verlag Otto Lembeck, 2008), pp. 275-296.

<sup>12</sup> *Ethics*, pp. 26-34. For his earlier account of baptistic distinctive marks, see ‘What is a “baptist” Theology?’ *American Baptist Quarterly*, vol. 1 # 1 (October 1982), pp. 23-28 (pp. 16-39).

<sup>13</sup> ‘What is a “baptist” Theology?’ p. 28.

*Christi* of the earlier Anabaptists); d) and, correspondingly, the forming of intentional, gathering, interdependent communities<sup>14</sup> in a daily sharing in the storied life incorporating biblical vision in deliberate opposition to the Constantinian marriage of church and (nation) state; e) the responsibility to witness to what life in Christ means both to persons and to the state in word and deed and to endure the suffering this witness may entail.

Dr. Ian M. Randall, a well-known Baptist historian, has surveyed the formative periods of the European Baptist stories.<sup>15</sup> Using history as a laboratory for understanding crucial convictions which marked the early Anabaptist and Baptist communities, he came to a surprisingly similar list of five distinctive marks of Baptist self-understanding: the particular way of reading the biblical story together in a community; living the costly life in the imitation of Christ; covenanting together and nurturing a Spirit-led community; redeeming the powers of the flawed world order by offering an alternative social way of communal living; and a missional commitment to telling the biblical story. This is an historian's description of 'thick' character, forming and transforming, living together as baptistic communities.<sup>16</sup>

The sets of markers discerned by McClendon and Randall provide neither prescriptive norms for, nor universal characteristics of, a baptistic community. They are instead descriptive markers of the way noticeable unity might be envisioned, that is, through a stable pattern of identification among

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<sup>14</sup> On the significance of communal interdependency, particularly in European Baptist life, see Keith G. Jones, *The European Baptist Federation: A Case Study in European Baptist Interdependency 1950-2006*, foreword by Ian M. Randall, Studies in Baptist History and Thought Series, vol. 43 (Milton Keynes/Colorado Springs/ Hyderabad: Paternoster, 2009) originally a PhD thesis with the same title, University of Wales, Cardiff UK, June 2007.

<sup>15</sup> *Communities of Conviction*; cf. his 'Tracing Baptist Theological Footprints: A European Perspective', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 36:2 (Summer 2009), pp. 133-148.

<sup>16</sup> In most cases the notion of community refers to a 'thin' community, which is a virtue excelling community. It is held together by a limited range of interest. For the purpose of this work, I assume 'thick' communities, which are character forming and transforming. Members interact in a variety of practices and in so doing they build identity. Community formation and transformation call for a common understanding and mission, for a lived-out vision, for discipleship with care and the discipline of watching over one another's lives, not without tension. To use Terrence W. Tilley's picture language, these are 'communities of solidarity, resistance, and fellowship' (*Postmodern Theologies: The Challenge of Religious Diversity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995), p. 151). Originally I have introduced the distinction of 'thin' and 'thick' communities for the purpose of defining primary and secondary levels of theologising, to which I will refer later in the paper, in a keynote paper 'Theology for the Church: A Convictional Perspective on Community's Theological Discourse', at the IBTS Directors' Conference: *The Dynamics of Primary and Secondary Theologies in Baptistic Communities*, 24-28 August 2004, Prague, Czech Republic, unpublished paper available through the author. It has been used and extended further by Nigel G. Wright in his *Free Church, Free State: The Positive Baptist Vision* (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 256, 280; Einike Pilli in her doctoral work *Terviklik Elukestva Õppe Kontseptsioon Eesti Protestantlike Koguduste Kontekstis* (A Holistic Concept of Life-Long Learning in the Context of the Estonian Protestant Church), Dissertationes Theologiae Universitatis Tartuensis Series, volume 8 (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2005), pp. 29-30; and Meego Rimmel in his doctoral work 'Sense of Virtue in the Estonian Baptist Tradition', an unpublished PhD thesis, University of Wales, Cardiff UK, February 2011, *passim*.



the specificities and particularities of baptistic ways of life<sup>17</sup> that constitute ‘a very notable movement to which all the churches of the modern world owe a debt’.<sup>18</sup>

McClendon further insists that a binding vision is needed to bring coherence among different expressions of integrated forms of Christian living within the community. The baptistic way of being a Christian community is best seen in the narrative, hermeneutical perspective of aligning congregational life with the biblical story. It is the ‘shared awareness of *the present Christian community as [both] the primitive community and the eschatological community*’.<sup>19</sup> In other words, ‘we are Jesus’ followers; the commands are addressed directly to *us*’.<sup>20</sup> I will turn now to view in some detail the three horizons of this bi-focal hermeneutical perspective.

## An Enquiry into Baptistic Hermeneutical Perspective

Attempting to speak on behalf of the baptistic stream of being a Christian community is a notoriously difficult task. It involves navigating between positing a narrow parochial perspective as the tradition (substituting one for many); and making typological generalisations such that no one particular ecclesial form of life will feel fairly represented. While there are no agreed-upon confessional boundaries, the stream has marks of a robust ecclesial identity, as listed above. The marks fit well with other nationally and internationally agreed-upon twentieth-century documents on the Baptist identity, particularly with the Statement ratified by the Baptist Heritage Commission of the Baptist World Alliance in Zagreb, Yugoslavia (July 1989)<sup>21</sup> and with the description of Baptist distinctives world-wide issued by the Study and Research Division of BWA.<sup>22</sup> These identifying marks, or better, characteristic practices of baptistic life, are the common property of diverse communities, arising as they do from a distinct hermeneutic. On several occasions, and following in the footsteps of his Mennonite predecessor Harold Bender’s earlier account of envisioning Christian life

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of Baptist identity and theology of identification, see Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, in *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, volume 13 (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2003), pp. 14-16.

<sup>18</sup> Payne, ‘Who Were the Baptists?’ p. 342.

<sup>19</sup> *Ethics*, p. 30; McClendon’s italics.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33; McClendon’s italics.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Towards A Baptist Identity’, in Brackney with Burke, *Faith, Life and Witness*, pp. 146-149. Walter B. Shurden considers it ‘the single best statement of the Baptist identity issued by a group of Baptists in the twentieth century’, in *The Baptist Identity: Four Fragile Freedoms* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth and Helwys Publishing Inc., 1993), p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> *We Baptists*.

through ‘the Anabaptist vision,’<sup>23</sup> McClendon referred to the theological hermeneutics of the stream as a ‘baptist vision’.<sup>24</sup> I will follow McClendon’s version of baptistic hermeneutical perspectivism<sup>25</sup> as outlined in his *Ethics*.<sup>26</sup>

McClendon finds the hermeneutical key to the identity and vision of baptistic communities in their distinctive reading strategy of the biblical story. It is a bi-focal strategy in which communities find themselves involved both as part of the biblical story and yet also examined by it: it is ‘that’ eschatological moral vision of the New Testament communities which defines ‘this’ present moral life of a community (or of a person in it). And it is also the ‘then’ of the future fulfilment of the Kingdom vision that verifies the ‘now’ of everyday living.

Moreover, baptistic hermeneutics begin in ‘the middle of things’ to use Archbishop’s Rowan Williams’s catch phrase.<sup>27</sup> ‘What holds the beginning, middle, and end of a story together ... [is] the linking of its parts into one narrative’,<sup>28</sup> which is the life of the community itself. The community must look back to its past as well as forward to its future.<sup>29</sup> While looking backwards, it is not intended that the community should become retrograde, dissenting, or sectarian. It is rather looking ‘forward to the roots’.<sup>30</sup> Such a perspective sees that the narrative of the Bible, ‘the story of Israel, of Jesus, of the church, is intimately related to the narrative we ourselves live’.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, looking forward is not a speculative futuristic

<sup>23</sup> *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1944). Bender argued that Anabaptists had a distinctive ‘way of seeing’ the realities of Christian life as discipleship, the church as a brotherhood, and Christian ethics as love and non-resistance (Ibid., p. 20).

<sup>24</sup> For a succinct outline of McClendon’s proposal for a baptist vision, see his ‘The baptist Vision’ in this issue. Cf. *Ethics*, ch. 1, and his subsequent papers, ‘The Baptist and Mennonite Vision’, in Paul Toews, ed., *Mennonites and Baptists: A Continuing Conversation* (Winnipeg, Manitoba/ Hillsboro, Kans.: Kindred Press, 1993), pp. 211-224; ‘The Voluntary Church in the Twenty-first Century’, in William H. Brackney, ed., *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1998), pp. 180-188; and ‘The Believers Church in Theological Perspective’. For a critical assessment of the concept of ‘baptist vision’, see Barry Harvey’s essay, ‘This as That: Friendly Amendments to James McClendon’s “baptist” Vision’ in this issue (Harvey’s italics in the title).

<sup>25</sup> ‘Perspectivism’ or ‘soft perspectivism’ is a technical term introduced by McClendon and James M. Smith to distinguish an epistemological position different from absolutism and relativism in *Convictions: Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994, 1975). Perspectivism ‘regards convictional conflict as expected, but not inevitable, fundamental but not ultimate, enduring but not inherently ineradicable’ (Ibid., p. 9). Contrary to absolutism, such a view recognises ‘the great, contrary variety of human convictional communities, and acknowledges that the truth perceived in one is not easily translated into the truth of another community’. It is also at variance with relativism by not assuming that ‘there is *no* truth that is true’ (*Ethics*, p. 346; authors’ italics). For further development of this notion, see my essay on ‘Convictional Perspectivism’.

<sup>26</sup> Here I am building on my previous enquiries into the specifics of baptistic hermeneutical perspectivism presented in ‘Baptistic Convictional Hermeneutics’; cf. McClendon’s essay in this issue.

<sup>27</sup> *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology Series (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Freeman et al., *Baptist Roots*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Parushev, ‘Freemad, Mod Rødderne!’ [Forward, to the Roots!], in *baptist.dk* (Danish Baptists’ monthly magazine, in Danish), Volume 152:17 (September 23, 2005), p. 14 (pp. 14-17).

<sup>31</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 36.

exercise. It is an acute alertness that the story of the Kingdom of God proclaimed and lived out by the prophets, by Jesus and by his disciples, is still the story that shapes our lives today. Yet we choose to take different paths to lead us to the Kingdom. This theological vision functions as a hermeneutical key ‘construing our experience by the way of Scripture’.<sup>32</sup> The vision operates with two guiding narrative images of ‘this is that’<sup>33</sup> and of ‘then is now’. The three horizons of baptistic hermeneutics can be captured in a motto: ‘the [storyline of the] church now is [that of] the primitive church and the church on the judgment day [is the church now]’.<sup>34</sup> Baptistic visionary hermeneutics may be even further defined as a particular way, in fact:

the way the Bible is read by those who (1) accept the plain sense of Scripture as its dominant sense and recognize their continuity with the story it tells, and who (2) acknowledge that finding the point of that story leads them to its application, and who also (3) see past and present and future linked by a ‘this is that’ and ‘then is now’ vision, a trope of mystical identity binding the story now to the story then, and the story then and now to God’s future yet to come.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, this hermeneutical vision is not merely a reading strategy for understanding the Bible. More importantly, the vision provides necessary and sufficient conditions for a way or ‘*the way*—of Christian existence’. It shows ‘how a people’s identity is construed by means of narratives that while historically set in another time and place nevertheless display redemptive power in the present time’.<sup>36</sup> This identity can be properly defined as a baptistic or congregational way (not to be confused with Congregational Church) of living as a Christian community with an open Bible, ready to follow God ‘wherever the Holy Spirit leads them’.<sup>37</sup> The baptistic vision works to keep the community centred not on the story alone, but on Christian discipleship in the world as a people whose lives are to reflect the life of those called to embody the Jesus way. Apart from the biblical ‘fulfilment’ expressions of the operational force of the ‘this is that’/‘then is now’ vision referred to above, an historic example may illustrate the way the vision functions in a Baptist’s daily living:

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> The phrase ‘this is that’ refers to the opening words of Peter’s speech in Acts 2:16 (in the wording of KJV) when on the day of the Pentecost he recalls the prophet Joel’s vision of the grand Day of the Lord (2:28-32). In Peter’s use, the Scriptures are not just an historical record of the past, but a living story line disclosing meaning and significance in the present. Similarly the phrase ‘then is now’ reminds us that that the expectation of the end times in Scripture is not simply information about how things will or ought to come out in some distant future. Biblical eschatological visions have operating immediacy for the here and now.

<sup>34</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 30; cf. pp. 26-34.

<sup>35</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology, Vol. II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994; reprint, Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2012), p. 45 (page citation is to the reprint edition).

<sup>36</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, p. 33; McClendon’s italics.

<sup>37</sup> *We Baptists*, p. 3.

In 1787 William Carey addressed the [Particular Baptist] Ministers Fraternal of the Northampton (England) Association. He asked those gathered to ponder “whether the command given the apostles to teach all nations was not binding on all succeeding ministers to the end of the world.” Dr John Ryland, Sr., a hyper-Calvinist and respected Baptist leader, is reported to have called Carey an enthusiast and told him to sit down. Carey may have sat down, but he did not stop asking the question until he had convinced a group of fellow Baptists (including Andrew Fuller, John Sutcliff, John Ryland, Jr., John Fawcett, and Robert Hall, Jr.) that the Great Commission was addressed directly to *them*. They were Jesus’ disciples. This is that. Then is now. In 1792 the baptist vision launched a modern missionary effort that sent Carey as its first missionary to India. ... This hermeneutical stance was shared [earlier] by Anabaptists who came to believe that in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus spoke directly to them...<sup>38</sup>

This example evidences that baptistic vision serves both as the guiding pattern by which baptistic communities shape their thought and practice and as a prophetic corrective to those thought and practices. In doing that, the vision provides necessary and sufficient scope for an authentic baptistic theology to develop. I will turn now to consider the baptistic take on the theological task.

## Baptistic Understanding of the Nature of the Theological Task

Measured by the scholastic standards of the university faculties of theology, which have been developed to satisfy their own academic ends, one may be puzzled as to whether the Baptists have written anything uniquely Baptist that deserves specific academic consideration.<sup>39</sup> Baptists do engage academic theology. One may list a number of Baptists who have written first class biblical, historical, systematic, and mission theologies. But when they do, as Dr. Paul S. Fiddes, a Baptist professor on the faculty of theology at Oxford University observes, they:

... have always resisted the idea that there is a distinctively ‘Baptist theology’, at least in terms of there being a Baptist version of such basic doctrines as Trinity, Christology, anthropology and eschatology ... [Baptist scholars] think of themselves as simply contributing to a common storehouse alongside other Christian theologians.<sup>40</sup>

They accept the rationality and the intellectual rigor of the theological task. For example, in their comprehensive collection of essays of baptistic writings, Freeman, McClendon, and da Silva-Ewell noticed that in search for

<sup>38</sup> Freeman et al, *Baptist Roots*, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Reflections on and response to this puzzlement can be found in McClendon, ‘What is a “baptist” Theology?’ Cf. *Ethics*, chapter one.

<sup>40</sup> Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 3.

distinctive features of Baptist doctrinal theology, John Quincy Adams,<sup>41</sup> Timothy George and David Dockery<sup>42</sup> among others ‘called attention to the similarity of Baptist doctrines with Reformed theology on such themes as the authority of Scriptures, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the kingdom of God, but they maintained that Baptists carried forward the reform of the church, which the Reformation only began’.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, Christian (and any other) theology must always embrace wrestling with the need and the pitfalls of contextualised faith, because there must always be an inseparable link between the faith community (committed to the common life of faith, defined by shared experience and guided by a common vision) and the theology that is *of* and *for* that community. In line with Friedrich Schleiermacher’s judgment, ‘any given theology must represent and refer to the doctrine of some particular Christian body at some particular time’. In other words, theology must have a distinct ‘community of reference’,<sup>44</sup> that is to say, the theological task is legitimately contextual and pluralistic. For a faith community to live an organic life, its ecclesial distinctiveness should be evident and expressed theologically in one way or another. If there is ‘the Baptist way of *being* the church’,<sup>45</sup> as I have argued earlier in this paper, there must be a Baptist way of *doing* theology.<sup>46</sup> A personhood, ‘a being’, the character of a person, or a community or a family of communities, is inevitably manifested in doing, because ‘[The] character is paradoxically both the cause and the effect of what we do’.<sup>47</sup>

Baptists do have a shared faith story and they should have a distinctive voice among the many Christian ways of legitimate theologising. Baptist theology is a theology that draws upon the fabric of the community’s narrative life, discovering ‘... traces of theology which appears only in the context of community’.<sup>48</sup> For baptistic theologising the narrative dimension

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<sup>41</sup> *Baptists: The Only Thorough Religious Reformers* (1876; reprint, Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Library, 2005).

<sup>42</sup> Editors, *Baptist Theologians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000).

<sup>43</sup> Freeman et al, *Baptist Roots*, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> Idem, *Ethics*, pp. 18-19; cf. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1968), pp. 88-93.

<sup>45</sup> Nigel G. Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1991); cf. the sequel, *New Baptist, New Agenda* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> A play on words on the title of the third and last booklet in a series edited by the principals of four English Baptist Colleges during the 1990s: Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes, Richard L. Kidd and Michael Quicke, eds., *Doing Theology in a Baptist way* (Oxford, UK: Whitley Publications, 2000). They are appended with a list of papers presented at the Consultations in Regent’s Park College, Oxford in 1996, 1997, 1999, cf. Idem, *On the way of trust* (Ibid., 1997) and *Something to Declare: A Study of the Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain* (Ibid., 1996).

<sup>47</sup> James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1990, 1974), p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, p. 3.

of the theological task is both necessary and appreciated. What is then distinctive about the form, if not the content, of a baptistic way of approaching the theological task?

Theological discourse can be imposed top down by the practitioners of academic theology devising a particular conceptual framework or a system of theological thought. It can also be initiated from below as a form of *ad hoc* theologising. The latter is the preferred baptistic theological paradigm. The vector of theological reflections points from the primary or lived-out theology of a community of faith to second-order theology of critical reflection upon the community's experience with God and on the community's practices.<sup>49</sup> McClendon maintains that:

The church teaches in many modes—by the visible life of its members as well as by the preached [or enacted] word, by the welcome it extends (or does not extend) to human beings in all their racial, cultural, sexual variety as well as by the hymns it sings and the door-to-door witness it bears, by the presence it affords the defeated and despairing as well as by the generosity it extends to the down-and-out—and not least by classroom instructions of members and inquirers young and old.... Doctrine is not manufactured by theologians to be marketed by churches or pastors. It is the church that must (and does!) ask questions and seeks answers. So doctrine (the church *teaching*) is the first-order task; doctrinal *theology* is necessarily second-order.<sup>50</sup>

Considering the vector of baptistic theology-in-community, expressed by the community's convictions of being and doing, the task of academic theology for Baptists (and others) can be defined, according to McClendon and Smith, as a science of convictions, aimed at 'the discovery, examination and transformation of the conviction set of a given convictional community;

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<sup>49</sup> Parushev, 'Theology for the Church'; cf. Parush R. Parushev, 'Theological Education and Academia: A Convictional Theological Perspective on Evangelical Learning', in Ábrahám Kovács and Zoltán Schwáb, eds., *In Academia for the Church: Eastern and Central European Theological Perspectives* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Langham Monographs, 2014), ch. 10, pp. 135-151. The dynamics of bottom up and top down theologising is revealed in the way the church is defined or how it is thought to come into being. For example, mainstream reformers would identify the church as existing wherever the ministry of Word and sacrament is faithfully carried out. Now clearly that requires a congregation, the definition of which starts with the ordained ministry. By contrast, Baptists would consider that the church is brought into being as women and men turn to God in believing faith. In this view the church is defined from the bottom up, from the act of faith as Christ draws people into living faith. This point was forcefully made by The Revd Dr W. Morris S. West in discussions about believers and infant baptism between representatives of the BWA and of the Faith and Order Commission of the WCC (Louisville, Kentucky, April 1979) where the issue becomes rather clearly demarked: faith that creates the church, and the church that accepts those yet to believe in the reverent hope that this will happen. West writes: 'It may be argued that those who practice infant baptism and those who practice believers [sic] baptism start from different "models" of the church. Those practicing infant baptism see the Church as an ontologically given community into which a child is incorporated, whereas Baptists and those practising [sic] believer's baptism, view the Church as a community which is constituted by the activity of God on the individual who responds consciously and believes and so becomes a participating member of the community'. ('Towards a Consensus on Baptism? Louisville 1979,' *The Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 5 [January 1980], p. 227 [pp. 225-232]). I am indebted to Prof Briggs for pointing me to this discussion.

<sup>50</sup> McClendon, *Doctrine*, pp. 23-4; McClendon's italics.

carried on with a view to discovering and modifying the relation of the member convictions to one another and ... to whatever else there is'.<sup>51</sup> Convictions here are understood as a class of formative beliefs that make us who we are personally and corporately. Convictions are shared properties and stand for persistent beliefs 'such that if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not easily be relinquished and it cannot be relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before'.<sup>52</sup>

One can readily name a cluster of widely shared baptistic convictions and discern some distinctive ways in which Baptists in particular have held them together in the worship activities and practices of their local assemblies by addressing the gospel of the Triune God in a particular place and time.<sup>53</sup> Some have already been mentioned and can be summarised (but not exhausted) by belief in the voluntary association<sup>54</sup> of believers in gathering communities; believers' baptism; the final authority of Christ in matters of personal and congregational life, including discipleship and concern for the mutual welfare of all the members; the priesthood of all believers; religious freedom, and the like. One may also find a particularly baptistic way of fitting communal life and theological convictions together in Eucharistic gathering for discernment of the mind of Christ and covenanted relationship of living together under God's eternal covenant of grace.<sup>55</sup> The baptistic way of theologising is a convictional one.<sup>56</sup> As stated above it attempts to describe

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<sup>51</sup> McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, p. 184.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 5. On the origins of the theological usage of the notion of convictions, see David McMillan's paper 'Willem Zuurdeeg and the Concept of Convictional Theology' in this issue.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. *We Baptists*, pp. 19-33.

<sup>54</sup> The idea of voluntarism in baptistic associating has to be handled with care. It does not imply that the members of the local community are free, as in a voluntary club, to set whatever terms of communion they choose because they accept that they are under the Lordship of Christ, constrained by covenant requirements, and in a relation of interdependency or sisterhood with other gathering communities. Voluntarism points to the fact that members of the local congregations are not coerced by the magistrate or state legislation in gathering and expressing their faith.

<sup>55</sup> Jones, *A Believing Church and A Shared Meal and a Common Table: Some Reflections on the Lord's Supper and Baptists*, The Whitley Lecture 1999, forward by Brian Haymes (Oxford, UK: Whitley Publication, 1999); cf. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, chs. 1 and 2; Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994); Brian Haymes, 'Theology and Baptist Identity', in Fiddes et al., eds., *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way*, pp. 1-5; McClendon, *Ethics*, ch. 1; Wright, *New Baptists, New Agenda*, ch. 1 and *Free Church, Free State*, ch. 3. Following on the debate on the nature of the covenant among free-church dissenters in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, John Smyth introduced the concept of covenant among Baptists right from the beginning of the movement by drafting their earliest covenant. Smyth's concept of covenanting 'with God and themselves' (*Works of John Smyth*, William T. Whitley, ed., tercentenary edition for the Baptist Historical Society [Cambridge, UK 1915], 1:252) has been used explicitly by the English Baptists and the concept is applied in one form or another by baptistic communities at large. On John Smyth's evolving view on covenant, see Jason K. Lee, *The Theology of John Smyth: Puritan, Separatist, Baptist, Mennonite* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2003), ch. 4.

<sup>56</sup> It is widely accepted that convictional and ad hoc baptistic theologising was instigated by the work of McClendon, Smith and John Howard Yoder. Recently the Rector of the IBTS Centre, Dr Stuart Blythe,

the commonly held set of convictions, to understand them by interpreting their emergence and sustenance through the practices of communal living over a period of time, and to critically examine, and if necessary revise them in relation to one another and to other sets of Christian and non-Christian beliefs. Being by nature a theology in and for a community,<sup>57</sup> it reflects critically on commonly shared communal convictions and its task is both a descriptive and a normative one. Baptist theologians are regularly ‘theologians-in-community’ engaged in convictional work for which ‘self-involvement is natural and appropriate’. At the same time, being ‘theologians-in-dialogue’ their critical and constructive disengagement from the life of the community when necessary ‘requires to be explained case by case’.<sup>58</sup>

## Testing the Case of Baptist Particularity

The use of the indefinite article ‘a’ in the title of this paper is deliberate and, in my use of it (which may not necessarily be evident, given the way English grammar works) signifies ambiguity. It refers to the fact that there is no commonly agreed doctrinal or any other theological system that all Baptists would hold together. As the Study and Research Division of BWA rightly observes, the task of discerning baptistic theological perspective is more complicated as it may seem at first glance.

There is no central body, such as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Roman Curia of the Holy See of the Roman Catholic Church that defines what Baptists believe. There is no one single historic formulation of beliefs, such as the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles or the Augsburg Confession of the Lutherans, which all Baptists at some given moment in time have affirmed. There is no one historic person, such as Martin Luther for the Lutherans or John Calvin for the Reformed churches, whose teaching gives to the Baptists their basic legacy of beliefs.<sup>59</sup>

While several Baptists have come to prominence in ecumenical circles,<sup>60</sup> Baptist bodies or communities are quite uneven in their attitudes

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has recovered the Australian Baptist theologian Atol Gill’s indigenous voice as of a communitarian convictional theologian. See Blythe’s paper ‘Athol Gill (1937-1992): Incarnational Disciple’ in this issue.

<sup>57</sup> A play on words on being a [lived out] theology in a community that gives life-witness to what the community believes, rather than doing theology in a community—similar to being a church rather than doing a church. See Brad J. Kallenberg, *Live to Tell: Evangelism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>59</sup> *We Baptists*, p. 20.

<sup>60</sup> Ian M. Randall lists several UK Baptist leaders active in the World Council of Churches (Simon Oxley, John Briggs), the Conference of European Churches (Keith Clements [and later Darrell Jackson]) and Churches Together in England (Roger Nunn, Hugh Cross, Gethin Abraham-Williams, David Goodbourn) in his *The English Baptists of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Didcot, UK: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005), pp. 491 ff. Cf. Parushev, ‘A Baptist’s Perspective on the Ecumenical Plurality ...’ and Joshua T. Searle, ‘The



and participation in the major ecumenical assemblies<sup>61</sup>, and for very good reason: they cannot represent a binding ecclesial consensus of any sort, apart from the perspective of a Baptist association and, at best, a kind of a Baptists' theology,<sup>62</sup> a compendium of the thoughts of some individual theologians.

As with the notion of voluntarism earlier, a note of caution is needed in regard to baptistic particularity.<sup>63</sup> Too much stress on the individual theologian tends to privatise theology and obscure the corporate dimension of baptistic theologising, or at least to distance second-order theology too much from the place where primary theology is being worked out.<sup>64</sup> Being a convictional theology, any authentic baptistic theology has to work at the level of acceptability in the local congregation. In the fellowship of the gathering community, 'the church listens to the Scriptures, prays and shares together, and tries to discern together the leading of the Holy Spirit'<sup>65</sup> in making moral and theological judgments. Making convictional judgments in baptistic communities is guided by their belief in the Lordship of Christ, in the authority of the Scriptures, and in the fellowship of believers. It involves asking: 'What would Jesus Christ do? [this is that hermeneutical trajectory] What does the Bible teach? [for the situation now] What do we together think is the mind of Christ as thought by the Spirit? [then in eschatological immediacy is now].'<sup>66</sup>

The baptistic family is not synodical but congregational and associative; thus the vector of authority, as stated earlier, is from the local to the regional to the national and beyond, and not vice versa, as if they had some para-catholic ecclesiology, whereby the Baptist World Alliance or European Baptist Federation determined the theology of the local church and handed it down through national unions and regional associations.

The important thing is the direction of travel—the local faith community may seek the wisdom of others either individually or in

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Ecumenical Imperative and the Kingdom of God: Towards a Baptistic Perspective on Church Unity', *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 14:1 (September, 2013), pp. 5-23.

<sup>61</sup> For a recent account of the involvement of the unions and associations of the European Baptist Federation in organised ecumenical life, see Jones, *The European Baptist Federation*, chs. 3 and 7 and materials of the conference on *The Church: Towards a Common Vision* organised jointly by the Consortium of European Baptist Theological Schools and the Division for Theology and Education of the EBF hosted by the Baptist Centre of Poland in Radość near Warsaw, Poland, 02-05 July 2014. Major conference presentations are published in the *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 15:2 (January 2015) and 15:3 (May 2015, forthcoming).

<sup>62</sup> Cf. R. Wayne Stacy, ed., *A Baptist's Theology* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), pp. v-x.

<sup>63</sup> David McMillan is also uneasy about theologies preceded by an indefinite article, when such theology 'is used uncritically, particularly in the context of research, the indefinite article becomes a mere linguistic gloss—the theology has become, for those who fail to be critical, an ideology'. See his 'McClendon/McClendonism: Methodology or Ideology?' *Baptistic Theologies*, 3:1 (Spring 2011), p. 57 (pp. 45-58).

<sup>64</sup> Similar concerns are expressed by Paul S. Fiddes in his 'Theology and a Baptist Way of Community,' in P. S. Fiddes et al., eds., *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* (Oxford, UK: Whitley Publications, 2000), pp. 19-38.

<sup>65</sup> *We Baptists*, p. 42.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

association, but they only receive advice, not commands. The local congregation may covenant away to a larger body responsibilities for aspects of mission, ministerial formation, or education. For example, they do this by contributing to central funds for mission abroad, for cooperative development of quality educational programmes, or for the support of ministry at home when the local congregation cannot do something on its own, and commissioning headquarters staff to undertake certain tasks on the congregations' behalf which very often could not be done by even a large local congregation. Whilst larger bodies cannot coerce a local congregation in matters of faith and practice, it is also true that those bodies can withdraw fellowship if the primary theology of that congregation is deemed heterodox or if the congregational minister's behaviour is deemed scandalous, or the local congregation's life detrimental to the good name of other associated communities<sup>67</sup>; and vice versa local congregations can and do withdraw from the larger body when it does not seem to represent their theological understanding,<sup>68</sup> e.g. in participating in ecumenical activity.

This situation may be adjudged as the liability of a baptistic way of theologising. And yet as has been argued earlier, Baptist history and present experience show that there are marks of robust convictional identity that are the common property of diverse baptistic communities with which Baptists would readily identify. Conversely, the plurality of baptistic convictional theologies can be assessed as complementary pneumatological expressions of theologies grappling with the immanence of God in the life of communities or in the ontic actuality of God's presence.<sup>69</sup>

The viability of a distinctively baptistic way of doing theology has been set out in the works of the late theologians James Wm. McClendon, Jr.—a Baptist—and John Howard Yoder—a Mennonite, among others. The probing goes further by theologians on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>70</sup> I have

<sup>67</sup> An infamous example is heavy shepherding being perceived to destroy the unity of the faith family.

<sup>68</sup> As exemplified by the withdrawal of the Southern Baptist Convention (USA) from the fellowship of the Baptist World Alliance, voted on 15 June 2004, <http://www.bpnews.net/18475>, last accessed 24 April 2015.

<sup>69</sup> The term ontic actuality of God was coined by Dr James G. M. Purves to complement the propositional ways of expressing God's immanence. He insists that the primary means of God communicating His present reality to a believer and a faith community cannot to be understood by propositional language alone. Believers can only apprehend God in so far as He comes to them or actualises His own Being towards them. The ontic actuality of God denotes the becomingness of God towards believers in His own Being. God is known and met with by them through His ontic actuality. See Purves, *The Triune God and the Charismatic Movement: A Critical Appraisal of Trinitarian Theology and Charismatic Experience from a Scottish Perspective*, foreword by Parush R. Parushev (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2004), chs. 1 and 8.

<sup>70</sup> Considering this probing, David McMillan makes a helpful distinction between appropriation and appreciation of the works of the most respected precursors of baptistic theologising. He ponders over the question: Should their work be seen as a constructive investigative methodology for the context of one's academic research or a standard pattern for understanding any research subject matter and their necessary re-definition in their theological categories? In response to the question he highlights 'the difference between appreciation of McClendon [or other significant theological voice] as providing a useful methodological perspective and the possible appropriation of McClendon's [or others'] work as an ideology. ('McClendon/McClendonism,' p. 45)'.

referred to a set of field surveys of Baptist theological identity among communities in Eastern and Central Europe undertaken by a team of the International Baptist Theological Seminary of the European Baptist Federation in Prague. The surveys seem to fit into a larger project of furthering the development of the notion of a baptistic way of doing theology for a gathering community of convictional, intentional believers. The surveys have helped to evidence what is meant by a ‘baptistic’ approach to what is regarded in this paper as primary theology (the theology *done in* such gathering convictional communities) and what it might mean to speak of a *contextual convictional theology* for these communities. Thus, the surveys contributed to a way of doing baptistic theology itself, which might be clarified under the following headings:<sup>71</sup>

- Theology as a *description of identity* (located in historical gathering, intentional, convictional communities);
- Theology as *dialogue* (a process of discernment; interpersonal; contextual, local);
- Theology as *inter-community exhortation* (not isolationist, yet not seeking agreement by abstractions, by generalisations; dialogue leads to concrete exhortation, whether warning or encouragement; dialogue reaches beyond the immediate context and specific community to other communities in other contexts);
- Theology as *listening* (hearing also from those who do not have control over the communication of theology; hearing not just ideas but reflections from such communities’ own living out of the faith in their particular contexts);
- Theology as *Scriptural interpretation* (exegetical, canonical, and as an ongoing process of Scriptural interpretation rather than becoming based on assured results of past interpretations; theology entails continuous interpretation of biblical texts and biblical theology as an exercise of believing communities as they come to possess their own reading of the Scriptures; it is not a distillation of the text in a system but a living with and within the text);
- Theology as *missional* (with ministry and missions as primary tasks of theology rather than as mere application of theological ideas);
- Theology as *communal* (responding to the life situation of the churches in their contexts and involving theologising together rather than persons producing their own theological conclusions in a theoretical way);

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<sup>71</sup> Wesley Brown, Rollin Grams, Keith G. Jones, Parush Parushev, and Peter Penner, ‘Towards a “baptistic” Contextual Theology,’ in Grams and Parushev, eds., *Towards an Understanding of European Baptist Identity*, pp. 175-181.

- Theology as *biblical practice* (seeking to walk in the way of the Lord as revealed in Scripture and being guided in that walk by the vision of the Kingdom Jesus proclaimed and lived that we might follow Him).<sup>72</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that there is a distinct way of doing theology—a baptistic way that corresponds to the Baptist way of being a Christian community. The argument of this paper proceeded by, first, defining the subject of theological enquiry—the Baptists as an integral part of a wider baptistic family of ecclesial communities. I looked at the marks of baptistic identity recognised in the works of Baptist theologians and historians. Next, I considered a hermeneutical perspective, building on McClendon's concept of the baptist vision as the hermeneutical key that aligns congregational life with the biblical story, the story that formed and still forms the pattern of baptistic thought and practice. Furthermore, I looked at convictions shaped by shared life in gathering, intentional, interdependent communities, and thereby becoming the primary source for authentic convictional theologising. Finally, I looked at the particularity of the Baptist way of life as a contribution to the development of baptistic contextual theologies having the embodied religious experience of communities as their point of departure. My enquiry affirms the critical appropriation of McClendon's theological method among others of value for the task of baptistic convictional theologising.

Considering the occasion of the academic inauguration of the IBTS Centre as a collaborative partner of the Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, I would like to conclude my reflections with a word of hope. With the European Baptist movement at a mature age and with the

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<sup>72</sup> Prof Briggs pointed out to me that many of the older Baptist covenants reflected the language of the farewell sermon of the early Congregationalist, John Robinson, to the Pilgrims leaving Holland (sailing on the *Mayflower* to New England in July 1620), resonating with this point by referring to 'the Lord had more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy Word' (see *Words of John Robinson. Robinson's Farewell Address to the Pilgrims upon their Departure from Holland, 1620 (and other sermons)* on the account of Edward Winslow in his *Hypocrisie Unmasked*, printed in 1646 (Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1903), available electronically at <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/558>, last accessed on 24 April 2015). This line lies behind the chorus of the popular hymn, 'We limit not the truth of God', which states, 'The Lord hath yet more light and truth to break forth from his Word'. This again suggests that alongside the doctrinal there must always be an experiential or existential dimension to baptistic theological reflection, for there must always be the possibility of theology as encounter: Encountering the living Christ, however this may be done,--in vision, at the communion table, in the life of his poor as in Leo Tolstoy's short novel *Where love is, God is* [*Gde lyubov', tam i bog*, 1885] or more biblically in the parable of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46), or of the Great Assize famously preached by John Wesley (Sermon 15 in *Sermons on Several Occasions*, text of the 1872 four volume edition edited by Thomas Jackson, full text available through Calvin College CD collection *Christian Classics Eternal Library* at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/wesley/sermons.v.xv.html>). A Christian who has never encountered the risen Christ is a very deprived believer indeed.

International Baptist Theological Study Centre relocated in Amsterdam, it is my sincere desire to see the Centre fully integrated into the vibrant intellectual life of the academic community of the Free University. It is also my hope to find the European Baptists, represented vicariously by the studious work of the Centre's faculty and students, regaining their rightful place and adding their unique voice to ecumenical theological discourse on crucial and mundane issues of the contemporary embodiment of the great vision of Jesus the Christ.

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## Willem Zuurdeeg and the Concept of Convictional Theology

David McMillan

**Abstract:** This paper demonstrates the significance of the work of Willem F. Zuurdeeg for the later work of James Wm. McClendon Jr. and James M. Smith as they developed the concept of convictions in the hope of contributing a means of addressing convictional conflicts. The paper also provides a summary of McClendon and Smith's critique and development of Zuurdeeg's thinking.

**Key words:** Convictions, Zuurdeeg, Metaphysics, McClendon

I intend to reflect on the influence of Willem Frederik Zuurdeeg in the work of James Wm. McClendon, Jr. and James Marvin Smith by recounting some elements of Zuurdeeg's *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*<sup>1</sup> and McClendon and Smith's critical appropriation of his work. I will conclude with a simple question on the theme of appropriation and development of McClendon's work in the light of our reflection on Zuurdeeg.

The text that I have been drawing on mainly for the purposes of my own research is McClendon and Smith's *Convictions*,<sup>2</sup> particularly the revised edition of 1994. It is in this text that McClendon and Smith refer to Willem Zuurdeeg as 'their pioneer' in the study of convictions.<sup>3</sup> Intrigued by this reference I decided to explore a little more about Zuurdeeg and have, for my own part, benefited from observing how McClendon and Smith critically appropriated Zuurdeeg's insights in the context of their own research.

The name Willem F. Zuurdeeg hardly features in the history of mid-twentieth century philosophy. Comprehensive encyclopedias such as *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*<sup>4</sup> make no reference to his existence or work. A biographical note in a paper he published in the *Journal of Religion* in 1960 identified him at that time as an associate professor at McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, and lists his student academic career as

<sup>1</sup> (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1958).

<sup>2</sup> James William McClendon, Jr. and James M. Smith, *Convictions : Defusing Religious Relativism*, rev. and enlrgd. ed. (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1994; originally published as *Understanding Religious Convictions* [Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975]).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> Ted Honderich, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

attending ‘...the University of Utrecht, the University of Leiden, and the University of Amsterdam...’<sup>5</sup> where he completed his PhD work<sup>6</sup> exploring the implications for the theology of contemporary developments in analytic and empirical philosophy. His major work, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*<sup>7</sup> was published in 1958. Zuurdeeg died at the age of fifty-seven and it is the view of his colleagues that his early death ‘robbed them of still better things from his mind’.<sup>8</sup>

In post World War II Britain and Continental Europe, philosophy had been going through turbulent times, with sharp exchanges developing between those with a classical metaphysical approach to philosophy and those of the still developing empirical school of thought.<sup>9</sup> Zuurdeeg believed it important to reformulate the problem with metaphysics not in terms of ‘an imprudent use of the faculty of reason’ as with Hume, nor ‘a confused use of

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<sup>5</sup> Willem F. Zuurdeeg, ‘The Nature of Theological Language’, *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 1 (1960), pp. 1-8.

<sup>6</sup> His PhD work was published as Willem Frederick Zuurdeeg, *A Research for the Consequences of the Vienna Circle Philosophy for Ethics* (Academisch proefschrift, Kemink, Amsterdam, 1946).

<sup>7</sup> Zuurdeeg’s other major work was completed and published posthumously by one of his colleagues, Esther Swenson: Willem Frederick Zuurdeeg and Esther Cornelius Swenson, *Man before Chaos* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> This is the view expressed by B.A. Gerrish in the foreword to *Man before Chaos*, p.5.

<sup>9</sup> Following the First World War, in the early 1920s, what became known as the Frankfurt School emerged, one of the founders of which was Max Horkheimer. In what is probably the definitive history of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, Weimar and Now: German Cultural Criticism Series, Book 10 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) (considered to be the definitive account of the Frankfurt School from 1923-1950) explains that the post-war crisis for Marxist thinkers in the German-speaking world actually proved to be fruitful conditions for a re-evaluation of Western European Marxism. The ‘school’ was initially the Institute for Social Research within Frankfurt University and consisted of a group of theorists who promoted the concept of ‘critical theory’ in which it was argued that social processes were the essential basis for ideas and theories and these processes should not be taken for granted as was the case with positivism and empiricism. Blackburn summarises the thrust of critical theory as ‘...a version of Marxism uncontaminated by positivism and materialism, and giving due role to the influence of the superstructure, or the culture and self-image of people in a historical period, as a factor in social change’. See Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Oxford Paperback Reference (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 140. While Zuurdeeg was among those reacting against fundamentalist positivism and empiricism promoted by the Vienna Circle, there was little else in common between Zuurdeeg and the American development of the Frankfurt School (in 1934, after the closure of the Institute some of the group emigrated and set up the New School for Social Research in New York). I would offer three reasons why, despite a common concern about empiricism, positivism, metaphysics and the need for recognition of the underlying social element of human experience, there is no common ground between analytical philosophers and social theorists in America in the 1950s. 1. The Marxist underpinning and Marxist sympathies of the Frankfurt School set it apart from the religious tradition of someone like Zuurdeeg. 2. Zuurdeeg considered himself a philosopher, while the Frankfurt School academics were understood as social theorists. It is fascinating to observe that many of the histories of Western Philosophy (Kenny and Russell are cases in point) make no reference to either the Frankfurt School or critical theory; such is the perceived distinction between the disciplines. 3. Zuurdeeg is within the post World War II tradition of the turn to language, a very different emphasis from the inheritors of the Frankfurt tradition in America who were more concerned with social transformation. Probably the two most significant accounts of the development of the Frankfurt School in both Europe and the United States are those of Martin Jay and Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Roberston, Studies in Contemporary Social Thought Series (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

language' as perceived by the logical positivists, but as 'a certain objectionable way in which man can speak, to be distinguished from other, more appropriate ways of speaking'.<sup>10</sup> In *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, Zuurdeeg expresses his understanding of metaphysics as: 'Man-Who-Speaks [*sic*] Is Inclined to Draft Closed Systems'.<sup>11</sup> As Zuurdeeg develops his argument, it is clear that he understands the nature of metaphysics as an over-dependence upon, or over-estimation of the capacity of, human reason to make definitive statements about the nature of the universe and a misplaced view that reason has the creative power to produce '... order, harmony, and goodness'.<sup>12</sup>

In a 1961 paper in the *Journal of Bible and Religion*, Zuurdeeg speaks of the sense of strangeness of learning from analytic philosophers who are hostile to the Christian faith and theology and is strident in his further critique of metaphysical claims and reasoning. Zuurdeeg took to referring to traditional philosophy as a 'theology' which espouses that,

...Being, Truth, and Reason are eternal, unchanging and unchangeable, imperishable, and completely immune to the decay and death which are so powerful in the visible world. Plato proclaims a message of salvation: Here, in Being, and only here, is salvation!<sup>13</sup>

He refers to classical philosophy as 'one long *Magnificat*' signing the glory of Reason and the most typical manifestation of this theology is the 'Justification of one's beliefs by means of philosophy...'.<sup>14</sup> Zuurdeeg addressed his theological critics with a resounding affirmation of the impossibility of encapsulation of any adequate philosophical framework for the God who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. The propositional element of truth is a small thing compared to encountering '...God in Jesus Christ. ...Christ is truth. It is amazing nonsense to think that we can justify this Truth by philosophy'.<sup>15</sup> Zuurdeeg continued, 'I must protest vehemently against the notion that the language of Christian faith consists of propositions which can be analysed by the means of logic'.<sup>16</sup> He declared as 'sheer nonsense' the notion that it is possible to conduct logical analysis of God the creator or

<sup>10</sup> Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 130, author's italics.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., pp. 121-22 and following Sir Alfred Jules Ayer, '...the assertion that "philosophy affords us knowledge of a reality transcending the world of science and common sense," Ibid., p. 126. Zuurdeeg discusses four types of metaphysics and their weaknesses as outlined by Herbert Feigl: 1. Deductive – 'producing factual conclusions ...from sweepingly general (and often completely vague) premises; 2. Dialectical – the confusion of '...historical processes with the logical form of inference; 3. Intuitive – '...convinced of the existence of a privileged shortcut to "Truth"'; 4. Transcendental – an attempt to '...uncover the basic categories of both thought and reality...'. Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>13</sup> Willem F. Zuurdeeg, 'The Implications of Analytical Philosophy for Theology', *Journal of Bible and Religion* 29, no. 3 (1961), pp. 204-210 at p. 207.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 208.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 209.



even the doctrine of the Trinity, affirming that Christian faith is precisely that, responding to ‘...the God who addresses us in Christ...’ in the weakness of faith.<sup>17</sup>

His posthumously published papers under the title *Man before Chaos* provides a more thorough presentation of his concerns with the metaphysical emphasis. Zuurdeeg views ontological metaphysical schemes as a means to deny the reality of death, a denial, or means of containing, the chaos of the human condition and what he calls, *the cry*, in a search for meaning by constructing closed schemes that silence the cry. According to Zuurdeeg, philosophy is born in a cry, but ironically, many forms of philosophy see it as their role to silence the cry.

In Plato’s cry there is a dangerous recognition of the threat and power of chaos. In the unfolding philosophical process this recognition is rendered harmless. Each of the great systems of philosophy thus at one and the same time brings into light hidden treasures and imprisons the power of the cry in its very system. The deeply embarrassing cry which showed man not only in his grandeur but also in his nakedness, his poverty, and his misery is checked and finally hidden away. The naked cry is coated over with technical terms; it is housed and clothed in a system constructed around logical necessity but hiding and disparaging the vital necessity of choosing to become human. The closer the system, the stricter the argument. The more cogent the whole way of thinking, the more satisfactory is the defense against the disrupting, disturbing cry. In effect, the cry is muzzled!<sup>18</sup>

Zuurdeeg went on to argue that metaphysical, moral, and religious language have in common the fact that they are all ‘convictional languages’.<sup>19</sup> So he argues that the analysis of convictions and convictional languages is the prior task of philosophy, not least when reflecting upon religion and theological dogma. Zuurdeeg stated that the purpose of his work was not to defend a ‘specific theology with philosophical means’ but rather ‘to understand convictional language – that is, man-who-speaks, not to defend a specific conviction’.<sup>20</sup>

Zuurdeeg arrived at this conclusion because, though he was interested in an analytical philosophical approach, he thought as an existentialist. Although he professed to be not at all clear as to what existentialism was and stated that it was not his intention to marry analytic and existential approaches to philosophy,<sup>21</sup> he acknowledged that there was, necessarily, an existentialist flavour to his work—perhaps something of an understatement. His sympathies in this direction became apparent when reviewing Carl

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Zuurdeeg and Swenson, *Man before Chaos*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 139.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., pp. 9-10.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

Michalson's *The Hinge of History*.<sup>22</sup> Zuurdeeg enthused about the possibilities that arise with an existentialist approach to theology, not least because it undermines the notion of Christian philosophy. He observes that: 'It is better to live and philosophize without the help of ultimate meanings than to hail meanings which do not fully deserve the admiration of an honest and most critical man'.<sup>23</sup>

The existential element of his approach was critical to the capacity to incorporate what had been disregarded by others in the analytical tradition as merely emotive and of little philosophical interest or concern. Zuurdeeg argued that this 'emotive' language needed to be taken much more seriously as it lay at the root of much of human action and commitment to political or religious causes and was not as ephemeral as the positivists suggested. For the believer of whatever ideology or theology, the concepts of which they speak are very real, the basis on which they make decisions or act, and therefore deserve and need to be engaged and analysed with philosophical rigour. Zuurdeeg's view was that it was legitimate not only to ask, 'What is the meaning of *this proposition*?' but also to ask, 'What does *this person* mean when he says such and such?'<sup>24</sup>

Zuurdeeg took the concept of conviction to 'mean all persuasions concerning the meaning of life'.<sup>25</sup> For Zuurdeeg, to speak of holding convictions is to speak of being overcome by some powerful convictor (a person, a god, an idea) to which the individual becomes wedded as a witness, not on the basis of empirical evidence, but because of the goods which the witness believes are vital and intrinsic to the conviction. The grounds on which we give assent to a conviction—even to the point of giving one's life for the conviction—are not necessarily obvious to us or to others:

...we should be careful with the term 'grounds' in the case of convictional language. This term fits scientific language, in which we can give a full account of the grounds of our assent to a certain theory, but this full account is impossible in the case of convictions. Nobody understands himself well enough to account for his convictions... . Impressive systems of a philosophical or theological kind are offered to us, ontologies, or metaphysics, but the analytical philosopher suspects that the real "why" of these convictions ... is hidden from the system builder.<sup>26</sup>

According to Zuurdeeg, given that none of us is fully aware of our convictions—though we are our convictions and give account of them in one

<sup>22</sup> *The Hinge of History: An Existential Approach to the Christian Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959).

<sup>23</sup> 'The Hinge of History: An Existential Approach to the Christian Faith', *Theology Today* 17, no. 2 (1960), pp. 235-239, at p. 237.

<sup>24</sup> Zuurdeeg, 'The Implications of Analytical Philosophy for Theology', p. 208.

<sup>25</sup> Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31 ff.

way or another consciously or unconsciously—they tend not to be held in individual isolation but are shaped and supported by the convictional group or groups to which we belong. In this connection Zuurdeeg conducted an extended discussion on the way that, through the use of language, emerging from our convictions we establish our existence by drafting world views.<sup>27</sup>

World views (*Weltanschauungen*)<sup>28</sup> are socially created and provide a ‘centre’ for the individual or community within the world, a means of seeing ourselves in relation to the world. Zuurdeeg understands worldview as a form of ‘...being-related-to the world ...expressed in ...convictional language ...this relation implies a view of the world, an arrangement of a person’s convictions which mirrors the order in which the world appears to him [*sic*].’<sup>29</sup>

However, the world view exists within the structure of language—to the extent that Zuurdeeg could say that ‘A human being *is* his [*sic*] language’,<sup>30</sup> the structure within which he (or she) can make his (or her) home. Given that assertion, Zuurdeeg argued:

...it is further necessary to see the community in which the language functions, and to penetrate into the historical backgrounds, without which neither persons, nor their communities, nor their languages can be understood. In a word ...we have to analyze not only the language itself but also the *language situation*.<sup>31</sup>

There are a number of points that can be noted regarding Zuurdeeg’s contribution; firstly, for Zuurdeeg, analytical philosophy brought to bear on theology a searing spotlight which exposed a tendency for complacency of reasoning and arrogance of rationality in ontological theological assertions. His was not an attempt to undermine Christian faith but an attempt to submit its language, its dogmas, and expression, to the examination of contemporary philosophy in the cause of greater integrity. It is clear that Zuurdeeg’s contribution stirred considerable unrest within the theological community and, while he is not alone in engaging contemporary philosophical developments in the service or critique of theology,<sup>32</sup> he appears to have made a unique contribution in the introduction and development of the concept of convictions, a conviction, and community- formed convictions.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., pp. 96 ff.

<sup>28</sup> Zuurdeeg finds the German term *Weltanschauung* particularly apposite for his purposes as it refers to ‘the nature and structure of the body of convictions of a group or individual’. Ibid., p. 96. In Chapter 3 of *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, Zuurdeeg engages philosopher Martin Heidegger as well as psychologist Ludwig Binswanger and historian Gerardus van der Leeuw in exploration of the concept of world view. Further discussion of the concept of world view will appear in Chapter 6.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 111.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 119.

<sup>31</sup> Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 17.

<sup>32</sup> Zuurdeeg’s book is often reviewed in tandem with others of similar purpose, such as Ian T. Ramsey, *Religious Language* (London: SCM Press, 1958), Frederick Ferre, *Language, Logic and God* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961) and Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1943).

Secondly, it would not be unfair to say that Zuurdeeg provides little by way of help in discerning or identifying convictions, offering little by way of methodology. Clearly his main concern was to establish the concept of convictions and how convictions illustrate that so-called 'emotive' language is fundamental, worthy of investigation, and not to be disregarded.

Thirdly, while highlighting the significance of convictions, Zuurdeeg made the following observation when reflecting upon the limitations of objectivity on the part of any researcher, philosopher, scientist, or theologian:

Christian scholars ought to be suspicious of their own convictions, and strive to be as unbiased as possible. ...Scholars are most vulnerable to distraction when they assume that they can be simply "Christians". ...Real research is only possible when Christian scholars openly admit that Isaiah, Luke, Paul and even Jesus can endorse convictions which are not only alien to all that we believe, but which we cannot take over in our body of convictions, in our language.<sup>33</sup>

Zuurdeeg's point is challenging and well made, but he appears to come unstuck at the point where, having identified the significance of convictions, he hopes to suggest a way to facilitate an objective research methodology. He seems to be suggesting that awareness of our convictions should enable the researcher to suspend, or bracket,<sup>34</sup> the influence of those convictions sufficiently to enable thoroughly objective analysis of the condition of others. He is undoubtedly correct in asserting that scholars in any field, not only theology, can only truly engage in research when they are open to the possibility that the results of the research may go against or fundamentally challenge their currently held convictions, but it seems that he can offer little other than the hope that we can successfully identify our own convictions and hold them in suspense while engaging in research. There seems to be no means of verifying the success or otherwise of such convictional suspension.

Finally, we must acknowledge that Zuurdeeg has modeled the capacity to both critique and develop contemporaneous streams of philosophical thought. He was able to critique positivist and empirical approaches and their fundamentalist tendencies, but at the same time appreciate the contribution of existentialism. More than that, he was able to craft a way of thinking within theology and the convictions of faith that could be radically analytical without being reductionist to the extreme of the positivists or surrendering to the temptations of ontological, metaphysical constructions. This pattern of critique and development is central for the critical enterprise and essential if one is to avoid simply settling into a

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<sup>33</sup> Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 288.

<sup>34</sup> Zuurdeeg, 'The Nature of Theological Language'. Zuurdeeg uses the concept of bracketing one's convictions quite extensively in this article.

comfortable philosophical or theological framework, which quickly becomes little more than an ideological reading of the matter under investigation. It is noticeable that this pattern of critique and development is followed, too, by Smith and McClendon in their approach to convictions and it is to their contribution that we now turn.

As noted at the outset, McClendon and Smith referred to Zuurdeeg as their 'pioneer' in the study of convictions;<sup>35</sup> however, while identifying those elements of his scheme that were of particular interest, they also identified a number of weaknesses in Zuurdeeg's argument. By critiquing Zuurdeeg's contribution and drawing from a variety of additional sources, they developed significantly the theme of convictions in the light of ongoing philosophical thought and scholarship.

In 'Saturday's Child',<sup>36</sup> published in 1970, they acknowledged Zuurdeeg's contribution of showing that, through the concept of convictions, religion and religious beliefs were required to be taken seriously and could be investigated on a par with other elements of human thought and existence. Of particular interest to them was Zuurdeeg's development of the significance of communities in the development of convictions and his observation that it was possible to be 'overcome' by a variety of convictions. However, McClendon and Smith expressed their concern over the lack of clarity in the definition of convictions and Zuurdeeg's use of the concept of 'mythic' to explain the significance of the use of biblical imagery or concepts in the articulation of religious beliefs. We could summarize their concerns as to the lack in Zuurdeeg under three main headings: 'definition', 'detection' and 'verification' or, the 'justification' of convictions.

As noted earlier, Zuurdeeg understood the concept of conviction to 'mean all persuasions concerning the meaning of life', but McClendon and Smith, rightly, challenged this as too vague, pointing out that '...it would be far-fetched to claim that everything of which one is persuaded on certain topics (devils, for example) has convictional status in ...life...'.<sup>37</sup> Attended to this was the problem that, without greater clarity as to the nature of convictions, identifying them and understanding their relationship with other beliefs and ideas would prove nigh impossible.

Zuurdeeg's assertion that no one understands himself sufficiently to be able to give an account of his convictions or make objective judgments in regard to convictions, if correct, left the concept in a dead end, unable to be of any further use to philosopher or theologian. The concept of convictions could be little more than a metaphor, perhaps a useful way of thinking about

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<sup>35</sup> McClendon and Smith, *Convictions*, p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> James W. McClendon, Jr. and James Marvin Smith, 'Saturday's Child: A New Approach to the Philosophy of Religion', *Theology Today* 27, no. 3 (1970), pp. 302-314.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 306.

how we function, but not a useful analytical tool. Clearly, if the concept were to prove useful for the purposes of investigation, then more thought would have to be given to a definition of the concept of convictions. Assuming that the issues of definition and identification could be addressed, there remained the substantial problem of the verification or justification of convictions. To speak of ‘justification’ is not the same as verifying the truth or falsity of a statement or a conviction. For McClendon and Smith the issue of the justification of convictions became one of the key concerns and it was their relative success in addressing this issue that ensured the concept of convictions, rather than being mere metaphor, could be a useful methodological tool.

Zuurdeeg was, to be fair, very aware of the provisional nature of his proposals and that further development would be required, and stated:

I have not aimed at completeness. Certain pertinent problems have been selected, but not all the relevant issues have been brought into discussion. ...It has seemed more important to show what can be done by the analytical approach in philosophy of religion than to pursue a completeness which could not easily be attained by a single man [*sic*].<sup>38</sup>

My final comment, or question, is: How do those who see enormous benefit in the work the work of James McClendon and the concept of convictions ensure that yet another ideological closed structure does not emerge in the form of McClendonism? Zuurdeeg’s observation that ‘man [*sic*] who speaks is inclined to draft closed systems’ comes to us as a warning and a challenge. It would seem to me that Zuurdeeg’s acknowledgement of the provisional nature of his thinking and McClendon and Smith’s practice of casting their net of enquiry widely in order to push the conceptual boundaries of understanding set the pattern for ensuring that the ‘cry’ for understanding is not silenced.

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<sup>38</sup> Zuurdeeg, *An Analytical Philosophy of Religion*, p. 8.

# Convictional Theology as Mapping Moral Space

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to investigate the intertwining of convictional theology with the abstract concept of moral space. In what ways does the development of convictional types of faith enhance the awareness of moral space for the church to live by? It is propounded here that convictive knowledge of a Christian believer actually is redemptive knowledge, as it is primarily related to the person of Jesus Christ. Moreover, shared convictions form the community of believers into a body of intentionality, and consequently also into a communal ‘web’ of moral space, with shared values. As such, convictional communities aim at mapping a world of covenanting relations, a city or society of the future, prone to make moral interventions for the sake of God’s Kingdom.

**Key words:** Convictions, Moral space, Intentionality, Covenanting relations, Communal interventions

## Introduction

At the beginning of 2014, on January 16th, the well-known Japanese veteran Hiroo Onoda died at 91 years of age. Forty years earlier Onoda was found in the Philippine jungle of the island Lubang, where he carefully hid away ever since the Second World War. For thirty years Onoda falsely assumed that the war was still being carried on, and he capitulated only thirty years later in March 1974.

In 1944 soldier Onoda was dispatched to Lubang with orders not to surrender under any circumstances. When Allied forces captured the island in 1945, he and three other soldiers stole away to the island’s densely forested hills. They would continue to wage their own guerrilla war, eventually killing some thirty Filipinos during raids and shootouts. Despite being left alone by his companions, Onoda refused to surrender and went on to evade dozens of Philippine army and police patrols. The Japanese government attempted to track him down with search parties and even dropped leaflets over the jungle telling him the war was over, but Onoda dismissed these attempts as trickery. He would not surrender until March 1974, when his former commanding officer travelled to the island and ordered him to stop fighting.<sup>1</sup> Happily, Onoda lived for another forty years

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/6-soldiers-who-refused-to-surrender>, accessed 24 February 2015.

as a free man, because his conviction had dramatically changed by yielding to the good news.

The story shows how convictions can lead us astray. It is a waste of time and a waste of life; yes, a sheer loss of reality, to exist in a state of war, because convictions falsely dictate us to do so. I do not take convictions as mere opinions. Opinions may shift and modify permanently, and they should, whereas convictions do not change easily. Convictions determine the way in which we commit ourselves to the world. They shape and form our deep hermeneutic of reality. However, this hermeneutic should not be equated with merely a subset of rational beliefs. For the greater part our convictions consist of passion and ardent beliefs.

Of course, there are the mere facts, the *data bruta* that will always be checked and balanced by ordinary rational presumptions we live by. Such factual presumptions are part of our commitment to life. We have learned to call a tree, “tree”, and if there are twenty-eight trees, the actual number is unwittingly determined by ranges of assumptions that we simply presume to cohere. For example, I trust my eyes to see, the light to uncover the shape and the colours of the trees; I trust the trees to be tree-like, and the series of numbers to always be counted from 1 to 28, just like anywhere else on the planet.

However, even the facts of life, even numbers like these, do have their proper place within the deep structure of existence. Every theory, whether simple or complex, is checked willingly and unwillingly against the background of both our commitments to the facts of life and of the deep convictions as regards to what is good, what is right and beautiful. Commitments and convictions go together, and effectively conflate through constant experience with the controlled and categorised practices of others.<sup>2</sup> We learn to feel and know life’s commitments, and subsequently also our personal convictions, by living together with others. We only know and nurture convictions by means of our whole human constitution, by head and heart, and, to be sure, by common inter-subjectivity. This is why Aristotle set his high hopes on the city, on the civic art of politics, on the management of human society.<sup>3</sup> I will come back to Aristotle further on in this essay.

Yet there is something precarious and unpredictable about the development of conviction. In the flow of life nothing seems as insecure and unstable as the human heart. Convictions do change, as the human will is less controllable than we may think. If we look around us and take notice of

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<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 63-84.

<sup>3</sup> See H. Rackham (ed.), *Aristotle, The Nicomachean Ethics*, rev. ed. (LCL 73; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934).



the staggering perplexities that swiftly fragmentise families, countries, and peoples of all cultures and societies, we cannot but acknowledge the feebleness of natural human inclination. Almost two decades ago the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells announced the pending dissolution of societal identity, and hence the dissolution of Western society as a mutual responsibility and as a civic inevitability.<sup>4</sup> As for today, Castell's estimation may be deemed an established fact. As a matter of fact, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor identifies a Western citizen as a monadic self, an aoristic self, which is nothing less than the qualification of a homeless mind.<sup>5</sup> The Atlantic urban citizen may be typified as an expressive individualist who permanently invents himself or herself. Life seems to be in permanent chaos.

By the end of the nineteenth century Friedrich Nietzsche somehow pushed the right button with his announcement of the arrival of a new era, a Greek golden age, with a new fascination for nobility and celebrity, violence and heroism. In 1883 Nietzsche had Zarathustra say to the audience in a fictitious city: 'I tell you: one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star. I tell you: ye have still chaos in you'.<sup>6</sup> The wise man Zarathustra had left the mountains and proclaimed in the valleys that God was dead and that man had to discover and follow his instincts. Zarathustra's words, 'Ye have still chaos in you', were somehow true; yes, they were even prophetic. The words portray the Atlantic soul that is in mere confusion ever since the decline of Western Christianity, the eclipse of God, which Nietzsche wisely anticipated. The concise sentence, 'Ye have still chaos in you', speaks to the Atlantic individual, who has been living for more than a century on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. The words, 'Ye have still chaos in you', also apply to us. 'Ye have still chaos in you'. Our churches, our theology, our convictions are in turbulence. At least they are contested.

Just as Hiroo Onoda needed a harsh reality check in order to reset his convictions, so Western Christianity is pushed back into confusing times to be urged to recheck its convictional foundations and to find out if there is still chaos that hinders us in living up to our convictions. Therefore, convictional theology takes as the major source for its confessional research the expression of theology in life experiences, whether chaotic or not, such as biography, the articulation of conviction in personal contexts, and also in communal relations and writings. Convictional theology is also an investigation into 'shared character' as embedded in communal life. Indeed,

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<sup>4</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. 2: The Power of Identity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), p. 355.

<sup>5</sup> See esp. Charles Taylor, *The Malaise of Modernity* (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> Also *sprach Zarathustra*, 'Zarathustras Vorrede' §5, in Friedrich Nietzsche, *Werke*, Band II (Köln [Cologne]: Könnemann, 1994), S. 102: 'Ich sage euch: man muß noch Chaos in sich haben, um einen tanzenden Stern gabären zu können. Ich sage euch: ihr habt noch Chaos in euch'.

ecclesial life is the laboratory of living theology. It is the finding place of redemptive knowledge, conviction, and confession.

In four successive paragraphs I will explore: (1) the characteristics of this convictive knowledge; (2) its intentionality and its moral space; (3) subsequently also its disposition to covenanting relation; and (4) its quality to initiate liberating interventions. Finally, I conclude by summing up some major results.

## Convictive Knowledge as Redemptive Knowledge

I start with an epistemological question pertaining to conviction itself. How do I know whether God is known, and how do I know that I know? I simply do not know. After all, any good answer would be revelatory, because only God decides if and how He is known. It is not up to us. Even by reading the Scripture I cannot decide on my own. After all, the Scripture is the book of the people of God and I need these people as a community of believers, as a hermeneutical community, to be sure, in order to understand the content of the Holy Book.

So my starting point for an investigation of convictional theology is within the community of believers, within fellowship with other Christians. This approach starts from within the church, which is the body of Christ, says the apostle Paul.<sup>7</sup> Here Christ still speaks and moves and acts.<sup>8</sup> In its search for God the starting point of the Church is Jesus Christ. Looking for God, the Christian church finds Christ. This is an important observation, which also strongly marked the style of doing theology of most early churches. The pursuit of God clearly implied willingness to follow Jesus Christ as Lord. Let me give three telling examples from early Christian times.

(1) Asking the Emperor Trajan for counsel by a letter in AD 112, the Roman governor Pliny observed that Christians sang hymns to Christ ‘as to a god’ (*quasi deo*<sup>9</sup>). (2) A couple of decades later an unknown Christian author, possibly writing from the region of Egypt, opens his written homily to unknown readers by saying ‘Brethren, we ought so to think of Jesus Christ, as of God’ (*hōs peri theou*<sup>10</sup>). (3) Moreover, there is a third text confirming that Christians confessed Jesus Christ as God written by an anonymous

<sup>7</sup> 1 Cor. 12:13, 27; Rom. 12:5.

<sup>8</sup> Henk Bakker, ‘Mapping Dutch Baptist Identity’, in: Teun van der Leer (ed.), *Zo zijn onze manieren! In gesprek over gemeentetheologie* (Baptistica Reeks; Barneveld: Unie van Baptistengemeenten, 2009), pp. 23-31.

<sup>9</sup> Pliny, *Epistulae* X 96,7.

<sup>10</sup> 2 Clement 1,1. See Wilhelm Pratscher, *Der zweite Clemensbrief* (Kommentar zu den Apostolischen Vätern 3; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), pp. 66-67.

apologist, probably by the end of the second century (possibly from Alexandria), and directed to an unknown man, Diognetus. The words regarding Jesus' deity are embedded in a remarkable set of pictures drawn by the author, which altogether form an impressive profile.

So then, did he (...) send him to rule in tyranny, fear, and terror? Not at all, but with gentleness and meekness (...); he sent him as a god [*hōs theon*]; he sent him as a human to humans (...) he sent him, not to coerce—for God does not work through coercion. He sent him to issue his call, not to persecute.<sup>11</sup>

So then, from three very different contextual sides (a non-Christian Roman governor, a Christian preacher, and a Christian apologist) proof comes that Christians in the second century venerated Jesus Christ as God, and, accordingly, that any true proposition concerning God should emanate from the central position of the figure of Jesus Christ. In other words, knowledge of God is redemptive, because it is Christ-centred. Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah, who was revealed to Israel and beyond Israel to the world, is the heart of redemptive knowledge.

Karl Barth was right in drastically reducing divine revelatory means for the sake of the Word of God, specifically for the sake of Christ. Of course, God may choose to speak to us 'through a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog', says Barth, yet He reveals Himself in the most direct way through the living Word of the Son, through the *viva vox Christi*. However, from this pronounced Christ-centred perspective runs the idea: Barth maintains that the concealment of God is as revelatory as the Word is. God's hidden-ness is a main characteristic of God, because it is exactly Who God is. Hence the church's confession should open with the notification that God is veiled from the human mind as from the eye. Knowing God, Barth asserts, begins with knowing about God's concealment and ultimate transcendence. Revelation never is a commonplace, but is always exceptional. We tend to fully reckon with God's revelation and deem every signal that amazes us as divine. But Barth would probably intervene from his side and reply with his famous word, 'Nein'.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, revelation is predominantly about the life and work of Jesus Christ, about the formation of the gospel. Jesus is the major source of our theology. God does reveal himself and he does speak to humankind, but the path God takes goes right through Christ's very words and deeds. From every cloud in history a voice from heaven still declares: 'This is my beloved Son. Listen to him'.<sup>13</sup> The words, 'Listen to him', have urgency and are exclusive. And they interrupt us as well, because they mean crisis, and they mean

<sup>11</sup> *Ad Diognetum* 7,3-5, in: Jeffrey Henderson, trans., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. II (LCL 25; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 144-145.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Barth, *KD* I.1 2-3, 55-56; II.1 96, pp. 132, 200-201, 204-205.

<sup>13</sup> Mark 9:7, NASB.

business. Moreover, they reach to the deepest convictions and values of a human being. Sudden changes of the human value system only come about by deep impact. Generally, the moral self develops only gradually. However, Jesus' impact on the human heart usually is intense; it transforms and changes moral awareness of life, as we observe in the gospel stories. After all, one cannot have Christ without embracing his commandments.

The person of Jesus and the 'moral space' he brings are inseparable. Jesus' followers bond together as a community of conviction with a strong determination. Moreover, communal convictions always pertain to redemptive knowledge, and knowledge may be called redemptive as it breaks down sinful human practices and motifs and replaces them. Knowledge is redemptive if it frees from moral ignorance and volitional captivity. In encounter with Christ, new insights evolve with graceful opportunities to turn one's back on the past and turn one's face to salutary paths in times ahead. Let me offer an example from Scripture.

In the Johannine community, Jesus is portrayed as the Saviour who descends from above and who really knows what he's talking about when he speaks about the heavens.<sup>14</sup> The knowledge he imparts opens people's minds and hearts to divine truth and love. John uses the verbs "to know" and "to understand" more often than do the other evangelists.<sup>15</sup> According to John, these semantics construe a vital distinctive of the young Christian community. His Gospel actually closes with the collective testimony regarding it that 'we know that his witness is true'.<sup>16</sup> From prologue to epilogue John's Gospel testifies about the coming of God to the world with only one goal: to impart salvific knowledge. The divine Logos and the Spirit both were sent by God to stir up the reflective mind of human beings and to elicit new convictions from the heart. The divine Logos in particular, as the expression of God's mind-set, is prone to change a person's fabric of thought.

With this brief biblical explanation of the emergence of spiritual conviction, I have also given the *raison d'être* of a new epistemology. Spiritual truth is more than a doctrine to which a person should merely consent. Convictions are mediated to the living church by the Word, by Christ, by the Spirit, and by the communal tradition, where individuals in concord learn to embody the gospel as a people of God. Unless convictions are embodied, the content of the convictions remains meaningless and void.

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<sup>14</sup> See Henk Bakker, 'Niet van de eeuwigheid - reflectie op een kritisch prolegomenon', in Henk Bakker, Albrecht Boerrigter, Jeanette van Es, Winfried Ramaker (eds.), *De geschiedenis van het Schriftwoord gaat door. Gedachten ter markering van de theologie van dr. O.H. de Vries* (Kampen: Utrecht, 2014), pp. 76-100.

<sup>15</sup> "To know" occurs in John 63 times, in Mark 9 times, in Matthew 16 times, and in Luke 9 times; "to understand" occurs in John 21 times, in Mark 1 time, in Matthew 4 times, and in Luke 3 times.

<sup>16</sup> John 21:24 (*oidamen*).

Once convictions become life experience, the shared faith commences its adventure of becoming a practice and a real matter of conscience and redemption.

The conscience is so much part of the conviction—but it transforms only very gradually. Convictions change scarcely at all; however, consciences hardly change. The conscience is the person's awareness of its valued self. The valued self is the subject's self-consciousness as centred in the moral space of its self-imagination. Every human being both values and is valued (positively and negatively) by others, and cannot but have the felt values at its disposal by imagination of the self (by storied imagination we imagine ourselves in particular circumstances). As human beings we have a strong internal imagination by which we detect and identify the moral space we encounter in ourselves and beyond ourselves. We cannot but live a valued self, albeit positive or negative, construed by convictions, conscience, and imagination. I now proceed by focusing on the idea of moral space.

## **Convictions, Communal Intentionality and Moral Space**

As a committed Christian, my valued self is primarily nurtured and sustained by convictions delivered by the Christian tradition. Jesus' words, embedded in the apostolic tradition, constantly inform the community I belong to. The community of faith is vital for the establishment of conviction and conscience in the individual to take place, since in the community the story of Jesus is re-enacted and maintained by powerful practices.<sup>17</sup> Together Christians celebrate the Lord's Supper and together they proclaim the gospel; and together they baptise new converts and together they conduct discipline. Accordingly, Christians also proclaim the gospel collectively. Moreover, together Christians also "know", and maybe quite surprisingly they themselves represent a very body of knowledge. For example, in ecclesial life all kinds of memories and expectation are memorised and stored up, and, as a matter of fact, unique mutual skills as well. These faculties of ecclesial memory, expectation, and skill serve only one purpose. The single intention they have is simply to know how to discern the mind of Christ. The living church is a goldmine of spiritual body-memory, body-hope and body-skill, and is surely prone to apply this knowledge for the discernment of the will of Christ and for the benefit of conscience and the valued self.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> James Wm. McClendon, *Systematic Theology; Vol. 1: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), pp. 178-182, 213-216, 221-222.

<sup>18</sup> See in this regard N.T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperCollins, 2010).

As a body of knowledge oriented towards spiritual discernment the Christian community evidently displays the idiosyncrasies of a community of character, which is a fellowship of strong intentionality and steely determination. Once again, the Gospel of John perfectly fits the model of such ecclesial environment. In John 13 the life secret of the community of followers of Jesus becomes apparent. Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and subsequently gives them his commandments. The chief commandment Jesus passes on to the nascent church is the commandment to love one another as he loved them. The precept is the so-called ‘new commandment’,<sup>19</sup> which is the leading imperative of the ethical life of the community. Jesus repeats the word “commandments” several times in the upper room discourse and emphasises that only those who observe his precepts actually love him.<sup>20</sup> The first Christian “cell” in human history was meant to specifically reflect Jesus’ moral intentionality and love-centred demeanour.

Human intentionality is never amoral; it may be immoral, but not amoral. Every human intention has moral implications, and goes with qualifier words like “good” and “not good”, “nice” and “not nice”, “beautiful” and “ugly”. Entering the inter-human space any individual will always sense the moral space that comes with the social tissue human beings bring with them. Consequently, moral space is defined as a social web of human pursuit and aspiration, human orientation and interest, disseminated and generated by shared conviction. For example, people can sense an atmosphere of love, grace and forgiveness, or an atmosphere of neglect and indifference when they approach others; it all depends on the unique mix of shared communal values.<sup>21</sup>

In the Johannine church the commandments of Jesus prominently determined the ecclesial moral space. Jesus specifically spoke to the disciples about his peace, his love, and his joy,<sup>22</sup> and these would abide with them through the indwelling of the Paraclete. The Holy Spirit would reveal the fullness of Jesus into the community of believers with regard to a new way of living and a new way of being God’s people, because God’s Kingdom was near. New dimensions of the celestial moral space were about to be revealed. The Holy Spirit would catalyse the church’s fabric of conviction into powerful initiatives to enter the moral space of God’s new world in Jesus Christ. Accordingly, the Spirit would also cleanse the conscience of the people of God and entrust every single believer to the care of the community.

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<sup>19</sup> John 13:34.

<sup>20</sup> John 14:21-23.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Henk Bakker, *Gunnende kerk. Kompas voor een waardegeestuurde gemeente-ethiek* (Kampen: Brevier, 2012), pp. 9-34, and Paul van Tongeren, *Leven is een kunst. Over morele ervaring, deugdethiek en levenskunst*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Zoetermeer: Klement-Pelckmans, 2013), pp. 99-133.

<sup>22</sup> John 14:27; 15:9; 15:11.

Communal watch-care<sup>23</sup> is a vital indicator in the process of the character building of the individual, for ‘Ye have still chaos in you’, we would concur with Zarathustra. There is much double talk, even in the church. The way we feel and think does not always match our deepest commitments to God and to life. Therefore, double-heartedness could even prevent us from obeying our own shared commitments, and make us succumb to the powers of fate, as, for example, the classical dramatist Euripides hinted in many of his tragedies.<sup>24</sup>

However, throughout history people have always searched for places of hope, safety, and blessing. Life is a moral universe, without exception, and the notion of spatiality is elementary in the stories people share regarding their dreams, visions, and utopias. In every culture, in every community and tribe, in every human heart, there are tracks and traces of a happy society or an ideal city mapped out by creative imagination. Apparently there lingers some idealistic moral map in the mind of every person, with deep convictions about what happiness, flourishing, beauty, evil, and anxiety are all about. A person’s awareness of a ‘happy city’ seems to be universal, though the details about policy, law, and justice obviously differ.

Aristotle describes in his *Ethics* how the city (the “polis”) in his time moulded and shaped individual citizens into a community of highly skilled professionals who contributed to the flourishing of the whole, and therefore to the benefit of every single person and themselves.<sup>25</sup> Only in a strong societal environment could individuals become a flourishing people. People needed people to grow strong as individuals. Nevertheless, the critical debater Socrates<sup>26</sup> somehow proved society to be insufficient in meeting the moral necessities of the few and the individual. To Socrates, the Athenian democracy was as wrong as could be, because in making moral decisions the Athenian polity followed the “vox populi”, the suffrage of the city people. The choice of the masses would not always be the right choice, as was obviously clear in Socrates’ own trial and death. Moral discernment, more than anything else, requires enlightened wisdom. Civic freedom as pursued by the Athenian statesmen would be sheer myth. Moreover, Socrates himself

<sup>23</sup> McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 51-53, 77, 227-232.

<sup>24</sup> In Euripides’ greatest tragedy, *The Bacchantes*, the dramatic fate of King Pentheus of Thebes is irreversibly settled because the king was curious to see what he actually despised; see *Bacchae* 815: ‘But would you see gladly what is grievous to you?’ (ὁμῶς δ’ ἴδοις ἂν ἡδέως ἅ σοι πικρά;); cf. pp. 877-882, 897-902: ‘What is wisdom? What is finer than the rights men get from gods to hold their powerful hands over the heads of their enemies? Ah yes, what’s good is always loved’. See <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/euripides.htm>

<sup>25</sup> Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1.2.6, 8; 2.1.5; 3.6.9; 4.1.42; 4.2.11, 15; 5.5.6; 5.11.3; 6.8.2; 6.13.8; 7.10.3; 8.1.4; 8.4.4; 8.9.5; 8.10.3; 8.12.7; 9.6.1-2; 9.8.6; 9.10.3; 10.9.13-14, 19, 23.

<sup>26</sup> See Henk Bakker, ‘Beyond the Measure of Man: About the Mystery of Socratic Martyrdom’, lecture held at the Centre of Patristic Research, 17 January 2013, Symposium ‘Moulding the Martyr: Early Christian Martyr Texts and Exemplary Mystagogy,’ VU University Amsterdam; unpublished material available through the author.

repeatedly testified to the exceptionality that an inner voice of wisdom guided him.

This raises the question whether a city of the free is within human reach or not. In fact, this question may qualify for the most urgent issue humankind faces since the dusk of the old millennium and the dawn of the new one. The twentieth century demonstrated the incompetence of human morality to create a safe place on earth for establishing flourishing life. Immanuel Kant, who set the stage for the optimism of early modernity, described the autonomous and enlightened individual who understands his or her freedom and yet takes moral responsibility to listen to the reasoned self and the imperatives he or she finds there.<sup>27</sup> Nonetheless, however reasonable a person may be, human life is evidently not that rationally structured. Again, in Zarathustra's words, we would say: 'Ye have still chaos in you', and the cities we build apparently have this chaos in them. Right after the first city was built in antiquity, the story of Genesis reports the Song of Lamech, the first song of hate ever mentioned in ancient history, in which Lamech brags about the revenge he takes on those who dare to hurt or touch him.<sup>28</sup> To his wives he almost horrifically exalts the disproportionality of the retaliation he exerts: 'I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me'. Cain's revenge held merely seven-fold. Lamech's revenge did not fit any formula at all. Any motive could make him explode and crush his enemy.

The polis can be a place of beauty and blessing, but cities also tend to become places of fear, violence, and curse. Two leading political philosophers, Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) and Martha Nussbaum (1947- ) express in their sublime writings high expectations as well as strong cautions in discussing the possibilities and powers of the city. Arendt warns against the degrading of politics to merely an instrument of the notorious urban consumer. Consumerism may become a toxic and totalitarian system when the *technè politikè* is misused only for the success of the industry of personal well-being (the so-called leisure industry). If citizens, in fact, degenerate to mere *homines fabri*, to producing people, they exercise a false autonomy, because they usually think they own the system, but no one ever owns the polis, Arendt contends.

Furthermore, Arendt defines politics as the optimum of participation in the sphere of freedom and equality. Politics is freedom in action,

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dutch translation of Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (1793), *Religie binnen de grenzen van de rede. Inleiding, vertaling en annotaties* [vert. door Geert van Eekert, Walter van Herck en Willem Lemmens] (Amsterdam: Boom, 2010), pp. 231-237.

<sup>28</sup> Genesis 4:17, 23-24, ESV: 'When he [Cain, H.B.] built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch (...) Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah, hear my voice; you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech's is seventy-sevenfold."'



consisting of a network of demanding people who take up responsibility as citizens to contribute to the quality of society for the common interest. As such, politics fully works with the covenanting dynamics of citizenship, which almost spontaneously emanates into written or unwritten societal constitutions and civic agreements.<sup>29</sup>

Aristotle expert Martha Nussbaum, too, may be deemed a passionate advocate of the bonding power of civic life. Moreover, Nussbaum explicitly fosters the ideal of compassionate world citizenship. Mutual care between citizens is learned in small groups with their intense loyalties, such as family life or friendship. Human compassion is the ability to extend these loyalties and to feel one's own vulnerability, and project this emotion reciprocally in social life. Therefore Nussbaum recommends nourishing a culture of extended compassion and letting education in common human weakness and vulnerability be profound in the teaching of all young people. At the same time, this type of education should go along with strong criticism of materialism, greed, power play, and possession. Humanity is not defined in terms of possessions, but rather in terms of the goods of the soul, just as the Greek philosophers long ago had expounded. World citizenship, and the compassion that sustains it, should be built on the goods of the soul, not on the goods of wealth and weapons.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, Govert Buijs, Dutch philosopher at VU University Amsterdam, also looks for signs of a promising future for the citizen of today. However, in examining specifically the Dutch culture, Buijs raises critical questions. Dutch culture is in transition, and has only slightly evolved from a society of care into a society of participation and mutual responsibility. Dutch politicians strive to inaugurate a new era of responsible citizenship, and for that cause we truly need a new social contract, Buijs stated at the occasion of the public Groen van Prinsterer lecture in March this year.<sup>31</sup> In summary, Buijs is hesitant about the probability of achieving an authentic culture of participation and mutual responsibility in the Netherlands. Yet, if the Dutch authorities persistently inform and invest regarding the new societal parameters the average citizen has to deal with,

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. Karl-Heinz Breier, *Arendt*, 3rd ed. (Rotterdam: Lemniscaat, 2002), pp. 30-51, 85-139; Hannah Arendt, *Verantwoordelijkheid en oordeel*, 2nd ed. (Rotterdam: Lemniscaat, 2006), pp. 151-159 (p. 159: neither Socrates nor Kant has proven the sufficiency of general rules, laws or legislation), and Kurt Sontheimer, *Hannah Arendt, de levensweg van een groot denker* (Kampen: Ten Have, 2006), pp. 69-77, 189-190.

<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.humanity.org/voices/commencements/martha-nussbaum-georgetown-university-speech-2003>, accessed 24 February 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Govert Buijs, 'De eeuw van de burger', 12e Mr. G. Groen van Prinstererlezing, 27 maart 2014 (Amersfoort: Wetenschappelijk Instituut van de ChristenUnie, 2014), pp. 1-46, at 12, 14-15, 20, 24, 36, 44. See also Robert van Putten and Wouter Beekers, *Coöperatie maatschappij. Solidariteit organiseren in de eenentwintigste eeuw* (Wetenschappelijk Instituut ChristenUnie; Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2014), pp. 11, 37-46, 59-71, 80-85.

surprising communal sources of creativity and loyalty may still be rediscovered. Yes, a typical Dutch sort of covenantal citizenship with adjusted constitutional sets of convictions and intentionality may emerge, resulting in a participation society, which is meaningful to the citizen of the new era.

Now I return to my discussion of the Christian type of moral space. Christians traditionally have expertise in searching for new cities of the future. In their storied memory it is said that ‘here we have no lasting city’, because ‘we seek and look forward to the city that is to come’. Christians believe that God has prepared a new city with solid foundations,<sup>32</sup> and that the citizenship God looks for is the citizen who yearns for safe places, places of communal care and participation. Hence, the church may be a safe guide for consultation as to finding a viable road to renewal. Society may need the church to ‘read’, understand, and nurture its covenanting moral space, and to map out and apply this knowledge to the surrounding culture, as the church regularly featured in the early church era.<sup>33</sup> In its formative days, the church was a community of blessed moral space, a safe place of longing for an even better place.<sup>34</sup> As it used to be then, it could be now, I think. We live in expectation of the new city, and in the meanwhile we live in its moral space and map out its bonds and boundaries. I would like to focus now on two distinctive patterns of mapping moral space; these are building covenanting relations, and acting out interventions.

## Convictions, Covenanting Relations and Truth

A convictive approach to theology brings its intentionality and moral space to the fore and also its orientation towards the happy phenomenon of covenantal relation. Convictional theology is not as strong about one’s set of truths as it is about the way these truths affect one’s life with others. Theology is the science of convictions that change and direct the way we look at life, and more specifically to the way we act towards other people.

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<sup>32</sup> Hebrews 11:10, 16: ‘For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God (...) God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city; 13:14: ‘For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.’

<sup>33</sup> See Henk Bakker, ‘Helpers en bondgenoten voor de vrede’. Een peiling van vroege christelijke zelfinterpretatie’, *Radix* 35/3 (2009), pp. 190-205.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Ivana Noble, *Tracking God: An Ecumenical Fundamental Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2010), pp. 144-189, and Judith M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 237-238, in pp. 211-238. Cf. Henk Bakker, ‘“So On Earth”: Liturgy From Heaven’, lecture held at the Centre of Patristic Research, 26-28 August 2014, Symposium ‘The Early Christian Mystagogy of Prayer’, Tilburg School of Catholic Theology, Utrecht; unpublished material available through the author.

The Christian's moral life is his social life, James McClendon wrote.<sup>35</sup> So, obeying Christ implies a moral commitment to caring relations.<sup>36</sup>

This is also the reason why James McClendon started his body of theology with a volume on ethics, not on the prolegomena or on the doctrine of God.<sup>37</sup> Knowing truth implies first of all doing truth, and opening up oneself for transforming shades of character. Christian convictions are formative insights that habitually transform individuals into followers of Christ.<sup>38</sup>

Right at the beginning, McClendon explains why ethics stands first. After referring to Schleiermacher, a small story from the early church sharpens up the focus of his argument. The story told by McClendon involves Origen and two young men who visited the sage for some instruction. However, the visit turned out to become a life-changing event. What happened? Both visitors were not only impressed by Origen's erudition and intellect, but more so by his spirituality and friendship. One of the visitors was named Gregory, who anticipated a brilliant career in law. However, in due time, he would be known in history as Gregory Thaumaturgus (wonder-worker), one of the famous bishops of the early church.<sup>39</sup> In retrospect Gregory told the story of the encounter with Origen, in which he interprets the gift of friendship in the light of the biblical story about David and Jonathan.<sup>40</sup> In Gregory's own words:

And we were pierced by his argumentation as with an arrow from the very first occasion of our hearing him (...), though we still wavered and debated the matter undecidedly with ourselves (...) Moreover, the stimulus of friendship was also brought to bear upon us, a stimulus, indeed, not easily withstood, but keen and most effective, the argument of a kind and affectionate disposition, which showed itself benignantly in his words when he spoke to us and associated with us. For he did not aim merely at getting round us by any kind of reasoning; but his desire was, with a benignant, and affectionate, and most benevolent mind, to save us, and make us partakers in the blessings that flow from philosophy (...) And thus, like some spark lighting upon our inmost soul,

<sup>35</sup> McClendon, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 1: Ethics*, p. 165.

<sup>36</sup> See Henk Bakker, 'The Changing Face of Unity or: Cutting the Right Edges', *Societas Oecumenica* (European Association of Ecumenical Faculties), Budapest, 21-26 August, symposium on 'Catholicity Under Pressure: the Ambiguous Relationship Between Diversity and Unity, or: How Do Churches Deal With the Diversities Coming From Growing Diversity in a Changing World?'; unpublished material available through the author.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Henk Bakker, 'James Wm. McClendon, theoloog en grensganger', in Henk Bakker en Daniël Drost (eds.), *Andersom – een introductie in de theologie van James Wm. McClendon* (Unie van Baptistengemeenten in Nederland; Veenendaal: WoodyDesign, 2014), pp. 114-131, at pp. 115-118.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Barry Harvey, 'Beginning in the Middle of Things: Following James McClendon's *Systematic Theology*', *Modern Theology* 18/2 (2002), pp. 251-265, at p. 354, and Robert Barron, 'Considering the Systematic Theology of James William McClendon, Jr.', *Modern Theology* 18/2 (2002), pp. 267-276, at p. 268.

<sup>39</sup> McClendon, *Systematic Theology; Vol. 1: Ethics*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>40</sup> 1 Sam. 18:1, 3-4; 20:8.

love was kindled and burst into flame within us, a love at once to the Holy Word (...), and to this man, His friend and advocate. And being most mightily smitten by this love, I was persuaded to give up all those objects or pursuits which seem to us befitting, and among others even my boasted jurisprudence, yea, my very fatherland and friends, both those who were present with me then, and those from whom I had parted. And in my estimation there arose but one object dear and worth desire, to wit, philosophy, and that master of philosophy, this inspired man. ‘And the soul of Jonathan was knit with David.’ This word, indeed, I did not read till afterwards in the sacred Scriptures; but I felt it before that time, not less clearly than it is written: for, in truth, it reached me then by the clearest of all revelations.<sup>41</sup>

Christian character is trained and transformed by covenanted friendship and covenanted citizenship. Not simply by knowledge. Turning back for a moment to the essence of the former paragraph, the pursuit of safe places and covenantal citizenship, the epic search for blessed moral space should bring all pilgrims of a better city to sources of the Christian tradition, I suggest. After all, in Christian thinking relations, basically, are as important as the truths they hold. In fact, in many respects commitment to relations is even more important than the truths we cherish, I think. I would not say that personal truth is unimportant, but I defend the convictional point of view that in many respects relationship is more important than pressing one’s truth onto someone else we love. I will not say, for example, that truth may never divide a community of believers or a family, but only after enough effort has been made to build strong relationships.<sup>42</sup> The church should be a place of safety and blessing, just because of the covenanting principle in keeping relations on a high level. This brings me to the final paragraph.

## Convictions and Interventions of Moral Space

In search for the city of the future, the Christian church has no fixed place. As a church of wanderers, she camps throughout the world, bringing the good news of the Kingdom of God to everyone passing by.<sup>43</sup> However, as the church comes to the world, she covenants. Coming equals covenanting. When God comes to the world, he covenants. When Jesus comes to the world, he covenants the New Covenant. In sending the church to the world, the Lord provides a covenant, sealed by the Spirit of God.<sup>44</sup> With the help of

<sup>41</sup> Gregory Thaumaturgus, *In Originem oratio panegyrica* [*The Oration and Panegyric Addressed to Origin*] 200-202, in Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, Arthur Cleveland Coxe, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 6 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994; first publ. 1886), pp. 27-28.

<sup>42</sup> Bakker, ‘The Changing Face of Unity’, note 14.

<sup>43</sup> See on the subject of “exile” and being a “pilgrim” the research of J.D.Th. Wassenaar, *Vreemdelingschap. Historische en hedendaagse stemmen uit kerk en theologie* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2014).

<sup>44</sup> Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4; 2:33; Gal. 3:14; Eph. 1:13 (the promise of the Father/the Spirit). Cf. Gen. 9:9 (the covenant of Noah); 15:18 (the covenant of Abraham); Ex. 19:5 (the covenant of Sinai); Jer. 31:31 (the new

the Spirit, the church is enabled to build strong relations against the tide, after all ‘a threefold cord is not quickly broken’.<sup>45</sup>

The bond of the church forms a God-given moral space that is ready to intervene in worldly situations wherever and whenever. Therefore, making interventions is one of the major practices of the church.<sup>46</sup> For example, intercessory prayer is a kind of an intervention, but also physical types of intervention, such as (I quote) ‘to preach Good News to the poor (...) to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come’.<sup>47</sup> The church is called to bring God's deep concern and values right into the ghettos of greed and poverty, power and brokenness, violence and abuse.

In early church times the demarcation lines between the pagan world and the church were strict regarding idolatry and sexuality.<sup>48</sup> The other boundaries, however, regarding everyday life were less clearly set.<sup>49</sup> Christians lived with the poor and the needy, and contributed with their money and possessions to their wellbeing. They could even live together with those who were formerly strangers or enemies to them, and looked for reconciliation.<sup>50</sup> It is mentioned that Christians gave to those who asked, and that they sought no retaliation when they did not receive their property back. Moreover, they also lived in the same city as non-Christians. They married and did not live in isolation. Christians had no language of their own.<sup>51</sup> They

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covenant); Luke 22:20 (the new covenant); Rom. 9:4 (the covenants); Eph. 2:12 (the covenants of the promise). Hence, there are several covenants given by God in salvation history.

<sup>45</sup> Ecclesiastes 4:12.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Henk Bakker, ‘Zonder slag of stoot. Jezus is de ware overwinnaar’, in Reinier Sonneveld (ed.), *Cruciaal* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2014).

<sup>47</sup> Luke 4:18-19.

<sup>48</sup> Christine Mühlenkamp, “Nicht wie die Heiden”. *Studien zur Grenze zwischen christlicher Gemeinde und paganer Gesellschaft in vorkonstantinischer Zeit* (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum, Ergänzungsband, kleine Reihe 3; Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2008), pp. 201-205.

<sup>49</sup> See Henk Bakker, ‘In the Midst of Life’, Conference Everyday Church, Amerongen, 22 September 2012; unpublished material available through the author.

<sup>50</sup> ‘We who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to everyone in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies’, Justin, *Apologia* I 14,2-4. ‘Who of them have so purged their souls as, instead of hating their enemies, to love them; and, instead of speaking ill of those who have reviled them (to abstain from which is of itself an evidence of no mean forbearance), to bless them; and to pray for those who plot against their lives? (...) But among us you will find uneducated persons, and artisans, and old women, who, if they are unable in words to prove the benefit of our doctrine, yet by their deeds exhibit the benefit arising from their persuasion of its truth: they do not rehearse speeches, but exhibit good works; when struck, they do not strike again; when robbed, they do not go to law; they give to those that ask of them, and love their neighbors as themselves’, Athenagoras, *Supplicatio*, p. 11.

<sup>51</sup> ‘For Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs, for they dwell not somewhere in cities of their own, neither do they use some different language, nor practice an extraordinary kind of life; nor again do they possess any invention discovered by any intelligence or study of ingenious men, nor are they masters of any human dogma as some are. But while they dwell in cities of Greeks and barbarians as the lot of each is cast, and follow the native customs in

frequented the same baths, markets, inns, and shops, as any other person, Tertullian writes. Christians differed from non-Christians by means of redemptive interventions in prayer and action.<sup>52</sup> In short: The early Christian church made all kinds of interventions, while living in a world often hostile to the Christian God. They entered this hostile world as a community and a place of safety, ready to intervene.

Nowadays such a church is as vitally needed as in earlier times. The mission of the church is to map its moral space of Christ into the world and to bring God's values tangibly to a broken world. The starting point is to practise convictional theology in the local community. After all, church practices should be based on right convictions. The Japanese soldier Hiroo Onoda's mental confusion took thirty years from his costly life. We had better not let this happen to the church. Let us not waste a year or a day.

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dress and food and the other arrangements of life, yet the constitution of their own citizenship, which they set forth, is marvellous, and confessedly contradicts expectation. They dwell in their own countries, but only as sojourners; they bear their share in all things as citizens, and they endure all hardships as strangers. Every foreign country is a fatherland to them, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like all other men and they beget children; but they do not cast away their offspring. They have their meals in common, but not their wives. They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, and they surpass the laws in their own lives', *Ad Diognetum*, pp. 5,1-10.

<sup>52</sup> 'If then (as I have elsewhere declared) we Christians are expressly commanded by our Master to love our enemies, whom then have we left to hate? And if when hurt we must not return the evil, for fear of being like the rest of the world, where shall we find a man to hurt? (...) When we come to the public service of God, we come in as formidable a body as if we were to storm heaven by force of prayer, and such a force is a most grateful violence to God. When this holy army of supplicants is met and disposed in godly array, we all send up our prayers for the life of the emperors, for their ministers, for magistrates, for the good of the State, for the peace of the empire, and for retarding the final doom (...) That kind of treasury we have is not filled with any dishonorable sum, as the price of a purchased religion; every one puts a little to the public stock, commonly once a month,<sup>2</sup> or when he pleases, and only upon condition that he is both willing and able; for there is no compulsion upon any. All here is a free-will offering, and all these collections are deposited in a common bank for charitable uses, not for the support of merry meetings, for drinking and gormandizing, but for feeding the poor and burying the dead, and providing for girls and boys who have neither parents nor provisions left to support them, for relieving old people worn out in the service of the saints, or those who have suffered by shipwreck, or are condemned to the mines, or islands, or prisons, only for the faith of Christ; these may be said to live upon their profession, for while they suffer for professing the name of Christ, they are fed with the collections of His Church (...) Another article we are indicted upon is this, that we are a good-for-nothing, useless sort of people to the world; but how can this possibly be, since we converse with you as men, we use the same diet, habit, and necessary furniture? We are no Brahmins, or Indian gymnosophists, who live in woods, and as it were in exile from other men; and we act as men under the warmest sense of gratitude to God our Lord, the Creator of all things; and we reject nothing He has made for the use of man. We are indeed very temperate in our enjoyments, and cautious in transgressing the bounds of reason, and abusing the favors of His indulging providence, therefore we come to your forum, we frequent your shambles, your baths, your shops, your stalls, your inns, and your marts, and all other kinds of commerce; we cohabit, we sail, we war, we till, we traffic with you; we likewise communicate our arts and work for the public; and notwithstanding all this, how we should be of no service to the public is a thing quite past my understanding', Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 37,1; 39,1-2, 5-6; 42,1-3.

Now I briefly recapitulate the basic results of my reasoning by formulating six statements:

Christian conviction is holistic knowledge.

Christian conviction is redemptive knowledge, as related to Jesus Christ.

Christian conviction shapes communal intentionality and moral space.

Christian conviction prefigures the city of the future.

Christian conviction designs the city of the future by covenantal citizenship.

Christian conviction is prone to make interventions for the sake of God's Kingdom.

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## Athol Gill (1937-1992): Incarnational Disciple

Stuart Blythe

**Abstract:** Glen Stassen in his book, *A Thicker Jesus*, identifies a number of people as ‘Incarnational Disciples’. These are people who have proven faithful in times of trial. This faithfulness can be attributed at least in part to their holding a set of convictions regarding Jesus Christ, the concern of God for the world, and the necessity of resisting dominant ideologies which work against justice. In this article I argue that the late Athol Gill should be included in any such list of disciples. Gill was an Australian Baptist minister, New Testament scholar, community builder, and peace and justice activist. Central to his thinking and acting were the centrality of Jesus Christ as the model for discipleship, the importance of community, and the holistic nature of mission. In pursuing these concerns often in the face of institutional and social conservatism I show that Gill exhibited the qualities which Stassen attributes to those who should be recognised as notable examples of the Christian faith.

**Keywords:** Discipleship; Community; Mission; Jesus Christ; Saints.

### Introduction

In this article I will discuss the life of Australian Baptist minister and New Testament Professor, the late Athol Gill. I will begin by introducing his life and the significance of it. I will then introduce Glen Stassen’s concept of faithful incarnational discipleship. Critically drawing on Stassen’s understanding of the features of incarnational discipleship, I will demonstrate that Gill deserves to be included in any such list of faithful incarnational disciples.

### Athol Gill

Athol Gill was born 5 September 1937 in New South Wales, Australia.<sup>1</sup> He was married to his wife Judith in 1959 and in 1960 enrolled at the Baptist College of New South Wales. To successfully complete the London BD with Honours, in which he had enrolled in 1962, he transferred in 1963 to Spurgeon’s College in London. There, under the influence of Dr George Beasley-Murray, his previous interest in Old Testament studies moved to

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<sup>1</sup> This information is taken primarily from the one complete biography of Gill, Harold Pidwell, *A Gentle Bunyip: The Athol Gill Story* (West Lakes: Seaview Press, 2007).



New Testament studies. In 1965, having successfully completed his BD and having been ordained on behalf of the Baptist Union of NSW, he travelled with his wife Judith and first child Jonathan to the Baptist Theological Seminary in Rüschlikon, Switzerland. While studying there, as well as being active in local church life, he completed both his Master's degree and then in 1971 his PhD under the guidance of Dr Gunter Wagner and Professor Eduard Schweizer at the University of Zürich. Both pieces of work were on Mark's Gospel and focused on the story of the 'Cleansing of the Temple'.<sup>2</sup> In February 1971 he left Rüschlikon to take up a post as lecturer in Biblical Studies at Queensland Baptist Theological College. There he re-joined Judith, his son Jonathan, and their new daughter Kirsten Anna who had gone on ahead.

In the years that followed, Gill would become a 'teacher, community-builder, advocate of justice, peace-maker, Christian gadfly'.<sup>3</sup> As a teacher in biblical studies, primarily the New Testament, he taught at Queensland Baptist Theological College (1971-1972), Queensland Methodist Training College (1973-1974), and Whitley College (1974-1992). His teaching was inspiring, creative, and humorous. He had a concern for the "under-dog" and attracted an exceptionally varied group of students, ranging from bikers to bank managers, to his crowded lectures.<sup>4</sup> This variety reflected Gill's concern and strategy at Whitley to provide theological education for those not necessarily seeking ordination, but who would learn new methods of interpreting the bible and the doctrines of the church and go back to their churches as 'agents of change'.<sup>5</sup> This strategy saw a considerable increase in student numbers at Whitley.<sup>6</sup> In addition to this, Gill had the constant responsibility of teaching the vision of the community and the theology of mission that undergirded it to those who stayed at the intentional communities he led.<sup>7</sup> He also toured widely in Australia and beyond,

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<sup>2</sup> His Master's dissertation, 'The cleansing of the temple in the Gospel of Mark: A study in the editorial methods and theology of the Second Evangelist', unpublished Master's dissertation, 1967, Baptist Theological Seminary Rüschlikon-Zurich, Switzerland is available in the library of the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam. A copy of his two-volume PhD dissertation, 'The cleansing of the Temple', unpublished Dr Theol thesis, 1971, University of Zürich, has recently been located after a request to the staff at Whitley College, and we are hoping to receive a scanned copy.

<sup>3</sup> David Neville, 'Introduction', *Prophecy and Passion: Essays in Honour of Athol Gill*, ed. by David Neville (Hidmarsh: Australian Theological Forum, 2002), pp. xiv-xix, quotation, p. xiv.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Dyer, 'Conflicting Contexts: Old Testament Reinterpretation and the Multi-ethnic Community in the Gospel of Mark', *Prophecy*, pp. 190-208, see footnote 1, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

delivering bible studies and lectures. Some of these were collected into his two main publications: *Life on the Road* and *The Fringes of Freedom*.<sup>8</sup>

As a community builder, Gill was founder and leader of two intentional communities: the House of Freedom in Brisbane and then the House of the Gentle Bunyip in Melbourne.<sup>9</sup> David Neville describes Gill as ‘an innovative leader of the Christian community movement in Australia’.<sup>10</sup> Allowing for ‘the beckoning finger of God’, Gill credits his journey into community as being the result of two students from the Baptist Theological College of Queensland challenging him to ‘help us discover a new form for the church, a place where people can be encouraged to live out this radical commitment you have been talking about’.<sup>11</sup> From this and further conversations and actions, the House of Freedom emerged. When Gill and his family moved to Melbourne in 1974, they were encouraged by the members of the House of Freedom to found a new community in that city.<sup>12</sup> The name of this Melbourne community, as Gill explains, was derived from a mythical Australian animal, which, in a popular children’s story, *The Bunyip of Berkeley’s Creek*, discovered himself when he found another bunyip.<sup>13</sup> Gill continues, ‘Rejected or denied, it is together that we will discover who we truly are. The search for identity is the quest for community’.<sup>14</sup> The humorous name, however, should not belie its significance. Dave Batstone, who lived and worked in the House of the Gentle Bunyip during 1980 and 1981, writes: ‘Weary of British and American imperial dominance within their culture, the community wanted an Australian name that would convey a true incarnation of the gospel within the roots of their own soil’.<sup>15</sup>

Gill’s communities engaged in a wide range of mission activities in this ‘soil’ of their local areas, ‘in response to the poor and needy including the homeless, aged, mentally ill and children disadvantaged by poorly-

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<sup>8</sup> Athol Gill, *Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1992), first published by Lancer Books in 1989, and *The Fringes of Freedom: Following Jesus, Living Together, Working for Justice* (Homebush: Lancer Books, 1990).

<sup>9</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, pp. 77-109.

<sup>10</sup> Neville, ‘Introduction’, p. xv.

<sup>11</sup> Gill, *Fringes*, p. 83.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-87.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> Dave Batstone, ‘A Follower of Jesus: The Living Legacy of Athol Gill’, *Prophecy*, pp. 22-28, quotation, p. 24.

resourced inner city schools'.<sup>16</sup> The Bunyip developed its own liturgical and eclectic pattern of daily morning prayers in 1978.<sup>17</sup> Despite the difficulties in a community consisting of people from a variety of traditions, a weekly celebration of the Eucharist was introduced in 1982.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly Gill emphasised the relationship between worship and mission.<sup>19</sup> At its peak in 1982, the Bunyip community had seventy members living within walking distance of the community centre.<sup>20</sup> The story, however, is not simply one of unmitigated success. On the one hand Gill's leadership appears to have been essential to the community, but on the other hand the commitment he sought could appear 'dictatorial'.<sup>21</sup> For a variety of reasons by the late 1980s membership was in decline so that by 1991 it consisted of ten adults and five children.<sup>22</sup> It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that after Gill's untimely death in 1992 the Bunyip was not able to continue long term. The proceeds from the sale of property, however, enabled the establishment of the Fintry Bank, Inc, a foundation established to work with people with schizophrenia. Also, the original house was restored to offer affordable housing to people in the area.<sup>23</sup> These are part of the legacy of Gill's community-building activities. Perhaps more significant, however, are the many people whose lives were affected and transformed through their connection with these communities and who went on to work for peace and justice in a whole range of situations throughout the world.<sup>24</sup>

The communities of the House of Freedom and the House of the Gentle Bunyip reflected in their range of activities Gill's understanding that the pursuit of justice and peace were integral to the mission of the Church.<sup>25</sup> Gill welcomed the fact that the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelisation in Lausanne, Switzerland recognised that evangelism and social action were not mutually exclusive and were both part of Christian responsibility. Gill, however, was part of a radical grouping at the Conference who went further and declared that to drive a wedge between them was 'demonic'.<sup>26</sup> He was encouraged by the way in which, following

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<sup>16</sup> Marita Rae Munro, 'A History of the House of the Gentle Bunyip (1975-90): A Contribution to Australian Church Life', unpublished Master's diss., 2002, University of Melbourne, p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, p. 148.

<sup>20</sup> Munro, 'History', p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Munro, 'History', p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, pp. 175-179.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 179, Batstone, 'Follower', p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Gill, *Fringes*, pp. 100-102.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 176.

the Lausanne Congress' lead, evangelicals in many countries increasingly saw that commitments to justice and peace were 'integral' to the gospel. On the other hand, he lamented that 'the impact of these developments is not always present among some evangelicals'.<sup>27</sup> His own convictions on this matter were influenced by his biblical studies and by his travels and contacts with Third World liberation theologians.<sup>28</sup> The importance and biblical basis of social justice as an expression of the gospel are common themes in his teaching.<sup>29</sup> It also represented a conviction he was prepared to take risks to pursue. On one occasion, as recounted by Batstone as a first-hand witness to the events, Gill travelled to El Salvador to face the chief of police in order to enquire why they had imprisoned and tortured a local Baptist pastor for serving the poor.<sup>30</sup> Fortunately it was a successful intervention securing the release of Miguel Castro Garcia and leading to longer term Bunyip involvement in El Salvador.<sup>31</sup> Gill also served on a number of international commissions belonging to the Baptist World Alliance, including the Commission on Human Rights (1985-1989).<sup>32</sup> In that role he produced a paper titled 'Human Rights: A Down-Under Perspective'.<sup>33</sup> This is a fascinating article in which Gill makes explicit a number of his interests and argues with reference to the bible and the poor that human rights and social justice are a concern for the whole church because they are a concern for God, not least as revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>34</sup>

In pursuing his understanding of the gospel there were a number of issues which brought Gill into conflict with members of the wider Christian—including Baptist—community. There was his commitment to teaching and applying 'modern methods of biblical studies'.<sup>35</sup> There was suspicion regarding the nature and morality of the communities he founded.<sup>36</sup> Both of these issues, in addition to his poor relationship with the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 177.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 22 and 177.

<sup>29</sup> See for example 'Evangelicals and Social Justice', Ibid., pp. 175-191.

<sup>30</sup> Batstone, 'Follower', p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, pp. 143-146.

<sup>32</sup> Neville, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

<sup>33</sup> Athol Gill, 'Human Rights: A Down-Under Perspective' in William H Brackley and Ruby J Burke, eds., *Faith, Life and Witness: The Papers of the Study and Research Division of the Baptist World Alliance 1986-1990* (Birmingham: Samford University Press, 1990), pp. 243-57. This paper was originally titled 'Human Rights: A Preliminary Sketch of "A Down-Under Perspective"' and is available <http://digitalcollections.baylor.edu/cdm/ref/collection/cs-vert/id/8657>, accessed 31 December 2014.

<sup>34</sup> For Pidwell's comments on this, see *Gentle*, pp. 152-153.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 50-51.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., pp. 49-50.

college principal, appear to have played some part in him having his position as lecturer at the Baptist Theological College of Queensland terminated in 1972.<sup>37</sup> Gill's ecumenical openness also created suspicion when some thought that ecumenical involvement involved compromising beliefs.<sup>38</sup> His forthright manner could also be problematic: 'He spoke his mind, not always tactfully'.<sup>39</sup> Yet it was probably Gill's 'uncompromising adherence' to the understanding of the gospel as described above, and his articulation of it in word and act, which made him a gadfly to contemporaries. Graeme Garret, a former colleague, noting an occasion in 1984 when Gill placed himself in front of a crowded church of delegates in order to seek reappointment (successfully) to his job at Whitley College after it had been initially refused, states:

And at the end there was an overwhelming vote of support. In it the church recognised one of its own most gifted children, even if, at times, that same church found his uncompromising adherence to the gospel terribly disconcerting. Athol lived by the courage which is faith in God. I, for one, found brushing up against that courage both daunting and inspiring. Athol was one of our prophets. He *enacted* the truth in our midst.<sup>40</sup>

Through his life and ministry Gill clearly had a deep and widespread influence. Harold Pidwell recounts that on the news of Gill's death as the result of a heart attack, 'Tributes poured in from around the world...All expressed their loss and their assessment that the church had lost one of its most significant voices'.<sup>41</sup> The tribute by Jim Wallis and the Sojourners Community in Washington DC includes the words: 'This one has many children and disciples and brothers and sisters and kindred spirits who will remember him always'.<sup>42</sup> Neville writes of 'his extraordinary contribution to the life of the church in Australia and beyond'.<sup>43</sup> Garrett's tribute preached at the service of thanksgiving for the life of Athol Gill on 13 March 1992 indicates something of Gill's significance, as it begins with the following words:

Athol Gill, where are you? Of all the mysteries this mysterious life foists upon us, none is more mysterious, because none is more impenetrable, and more threatening, than death. We who stand on this side of that strange gateway of death know only that it has closed. ..Where does a life go? How is it that just yesterday we could say, 'Athol *is* here', 'Athol *says* this', 'Athol *feels* that', but

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 51-58.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-127.

<sup>39</sup> Graeme Garrett, 'Athol Gill: A Tribute', *Prophecy*, pp. 3-8, quotation, p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, p. 167.

<sup>42</sup> Cited *ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>43</sup> Neville, 'Introduction', p. xix.

today we can only say, ‘Athol *was* here’, ‘Athol *said* this’, ‘Athol *felt* that’. All of a sudden Athol has been shoved irretrievably into the past. That move is an utter affront, a devastation. I feel as if a hand-grenade has exploded without warning in my guts...I cannot begin to speak of Athol the public figure. I tried to think in those terms. Athol as we knew him in so many guises. Athol as one of the most significant leaders in the Christian community in Australia. Athol as founder and leader of the House of the Gentle Bunyip and Professor of New Testament at Whitley College. Athol as the teacher who influenced a whole generation of theological students, ordination candidates, Christian activists and ordinary believers, and who through his books, essays, lecturing and preaching, touched the lives of thousands of others in this land and beyond. Athol, with that special style of faith—tough, thoughtful, compassionate, socially active, yet steeped in worship and prayer—whose inspiration brought new life and vision to places in the church which many of us had given up as hopeless. Athol the man who lived what he believed with passion, so that the impact of his living on those who knew him was unforgettable.<sup>44</sup>

As a consequence of this stated significance it may be a source of some regret that Gill’s contribution to the church is perhaps not as widely known outside of Australia, including in Baptist circles, as it should be. In this respect Gill does not appear to have gained even enough of a lesser-known status to merit a chapter in such a collection as *Twentieth Century Shapers of Baptist Social Ethics*.<sup>45</sup> Be this as it may, I will continue in this article to demonstrate that Gill deserves to be listed among the sort of characters whom Glen Stassen names as faithful incarnational disciples.

## Incarnational Discipleship

The late Glen Stassen in his book, *A Thicker Jesus*, advances the ethic of ‘Incarnational Discipleship’.<sup>46</sup> He defines this ‘Incarnational Discipleship’ as consisting simultaneously of three dimensions: (1) a ‘*thick, historically embodied, realistic understanding of Jesus Christ* as revealing God’s character and thus providing norms for guiding our lives’; (2) ‘a holistic understanding of the Lordship of Christ or sovereignty of God *throughout all of life and all of creation*’; (3) ‘a strong call for *repentance from captivity to ideologies* such as nationalism’.<sup>47</sup> Stassen argues with reference to the work of Alasdair MacIntyre and Nancey Murphy that this ethic provides a method of theological enquiry which enables the Christian tradition to

<sup>44</sup> Garrett, ‘Tribute’, pp. 3-4.

<sup>45</sup> *Twentieth Century Shapers of Baptist Social Ethics*, ed. by Larry W. McSwain and Wm. Loyd Allen (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2008).

<sup>46</sup> Glen Harold Stassen, *A Thicker Jesus: Incarnational Discipleship in a Secular Age* (Louisville, Ky.: WJKP, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16, italics Stassen.

examine itself and the validity of other traditions in relation to the challenges of the secular age.<sup>48</sup> In turn, with reference to James Wm. McClendon and his *Biography as Theology*, he claims that the legitimacy of this ethic is demonstrated in the ‘laboratory’ of history where it was embodied in the lives of individuals who ‘almost all of us’ clearly regard as having lived faithfully in times of testing.<sup>49</sup> Among those Stassen names as demonstrating such faithful discipleship are: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, Clarence Jordan, Muriel Lester and André Trocmé. We might say that that Stassen offers us ‘Biography as Ethics’ rather than ‘Biography as Theology’. This distinction, however, is one which the theological projects of McClendon and Stassen would probably not recognise as necessary or valid.

Athol Gill does not appear in Stassen’s list of ‘heroes and heroines’ whose lives demonstrate faithful incarnational discipleship.<sup>50</sup> I will seek to demonstrate, however, that he belongs in such a list. I will do this by bringing Gill’s story into conversation with Stassen’s categories and criteria for identifying such lives. Since I will be adopting Stassen’s approach in *A Thicker Jesus* the method requires some critical discussion.

One issue which requires consideration is his use of the term ‘incarnation’. For some this is problematic as they believe that this term should be reserved for Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup> I do not share this reservation. The term is capable of carrying different nuances of meaning in context when applied on the one hand to Jesus Christ and on the other hand to his followers. This being the case, while recognising these nuances of meaning, it is a particularly suitable word to describe followers who embodied in their own human lives the way of God as demonstrated in the human person of Jesus the Christ. This is the way in which Stassen uses the term. His concern is to link the ‘real’ actions and struggles of disciples in their context with the ‘real’ actions and struggles of Jesus the incarnate one.<sup>52</sup> Accordingly, incarnational discipleship appears a quite appropriate term to associate with Gill about whom it has been said, ‘He *knew* God, not only with his head but also with his flesh and blood. His theology was incarnate’.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7 and pp. 48-55.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-15.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> This was a critique offered of the paper I presented at the Convictional Theologies Conference at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre in Amsterdam in November 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Stassen, *Thicker*, pp. 42-47.

<sup>53</sup> Garrett, ‘Tribute’, p. 8.

Another issue worth discussing in Stassen's approach relates to the basis on which he determines those who can be considered faithful or not. He states that some sort of clear common agreement by 'almost all of us' can identify 'who was faithful and who was unfaithful' in the testing of history.<sup>54</sup> On its own, this reduces faithfulness and unfaithfulness to the shifting perspective of whoever 'us' is at any one point in history. For Stassen the 'us' is the Christian community.<sup>55</sup> This does not remove all of the difficulties, although it does place the ethical conversation within a particular tradition and 'web of meaning'.<sup>56</sup> In turn, however, Stassen brings more focus by arguing that the 'way of a thicker Jesus' expressed in the practice of justice establishes the basis on which faithfulness can be recognised.<sup>57</sup> Again, this does not remove all the difficulties because the nature of that 'way' may remain an open question to various interpreters. The claim to faithfulness, therefore, is always a contested issue. This notwithstanding, in this article I make the case for Gill's faithfulness as an incarnational disciple in relation to Stassen's understanding of what it means to follow in the way of a thicker Jesus, as this is the basis on which he judges the other characters of whom he writes.

Following on from the above in appropriating Stassen's approach, it is necessary to give attention in detail to Stassen's features of incarnational discipleship. For in general terms Stassen's features of a belief in the Sovereignty of God, the leading of the Holy Spirit, and importance of Jesus, offer a neat, almost Trinitarian concern which many, if not most, Christians would be ready to own.<sup>58</sup> Stassen offers these features, however, not as orthodox doctrinal beliefs, but as convictions expressed concretely in practice in the laboratory of history. Therefore, to grasp what he means when he talks about incarnational disciples understanding the Sovereignty of God, it is necessary to look at the examples he gives of those who lived out this understanding in practice. In this way we discover, for example, that by an understanding of the Sovereignty of God he means engagement with socio-political issues because God is understood to be concerned with the whole of life, including the 'secular realm'.<sup>59</sup> I emphasise the importance of detail for two reasons. The first is to warn against a general application of Stassen's ideas without attention to the details which can mitigate the value of the approach for identifying faithfulness over and against unfaithfulness. The second is to emphasise Stassen's connection with James Wm. McClendon's

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<sup>54</sup> Stassen, *Thicker*, p. 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



ideas of convictional theology with its emphasis on practices that throw further light on the approach he is taking.<sup>60</sup> In discussing Gill my concern will be to interpret him in relation to the details of what Stassen means when he talks about the features of incarnational discipleship.

A further observation in relation to Stassen's approach and my appropriation of it for Gill is to note its partial nature. Stassen identifies several people he deems as faithful examples of those who followed in the way of a thicker Jesus. His focus is on their public lives and ministries, often in relation to particular crises. This, to be sure, is not all that can be said about any of the people he discusses. This does not negate his claims of their faithfulness; it simply recognises the limited nature and partiality of the assessment in relation to the person's total life and character. The same methodological partiality will exist in my assessment of Gill in this article. It is limited, essentially, to his public ministry and to the sources presently available to me.<sup>61</sup> All research is partial in relation to sources and focus, but it is better to explicitly acknowledge it in order to allow reflexive critique of analysis.

Finally, it is worth commenting on the value of offering such a biographical analysis. For Stassen, his concern is to identify an ethical approach from within the Christian tradition which can address the challenges of the secular age.<sup>62</sup> My own interest, however, lies with Stassen's approach as an expression of McClendon's *Biography as Theology*. In this trajectory the value in identifying Christian characters who stand out in their time is to offer 'saints' to the Church.<sup>63</sup> Not saints portrayed in some sort of uncritical hagiography, but rather in the sense of people who 'hold the church's convictions up to itself, showing what such a community must be if it is to *really* centre upon the life of Jesus Christ, as its name claims'.<sup>64</sup> People who embody in their lives the central theological doctrines and ethical truths of the faith and thus introduce us anew to the gospel

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., pp. 10-11.

<sup>61</sup> The sources I have used are referenced in the footnotes.

<sup>62</sup> Concerning this, see Stassen, *Thicker*, chapter 4, 'The Challenges of *A Secular Age* to Christian Faith', pp. 48-55.

<sup>63</sup> James Wm McClendon, Jr., 'Christian Worship and the Saints', Appendix, *Biography As Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2002=1974), pp. 172-184; McClendon, 'Do We Need Saints Today?' in *The Collected Works of James Wm. McClendon Jr.*, vol. 2 ed. by Ryan Andrew Newson and Andrew C. Wright (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2014), pp. 285-294.

<sup>64</sup> This is the editors' analysis introducing the paper 'Do We Need Saints Today?' while reflecting upon what McClendon had written previously about the value of biography as theology in relation to the saints, p. 285; italics of the editors.

message.<sup>65</sup> In considering such people, we need not deny their failings. Such an approach minimises rather than enhances their value as human examples. It also undermines the significance of the grace of God in which all Christian living takes place. Here I quote Gill as he reflects upon his community-building activities:

If we hadn't been so stupid—or perhaps simply so human—we may have done a lot better. But, then, perhaps we would not have learned just how much Christian community is a life of grace and that God calls us to journey together, through our failures and our successes, towards the city with a firm foundation.<sup>66</sup>

The saints who can serve the Church are those who offer, with all of their failings and humanity, 'realistic' examples of lives faithfully lived in context.<sup>67</sup> Those whom Stassen names are identified as such people. My appropriation of Stassen's method is to place Gill among such people who, in McClendon's terms, can 'serve as encouragement and guidance for our own lives in the presence of God'.<sup>68</sup>

## Athol Gill: Incarnational Disciple

Stassen argues that incarnational disciples are those in whose lives it is possible to see simultaneously three dimensions, or perhaps better convictions, which enable them to be faithful when tested in the laboratory of history. In the remainder of this article I will demonstrate that Gill's life demonstrates these convictions in such a way that his faithful incarnational discipleship should be recognised. I will take each of Stassen's categories in turn and relate it to Gill's teaching and practice. Prior to doing this, however, I will describe the historical context in which Gill's faithfulness was performed.

### Time of Testing

For Stassen, incarnational disciples are those who are faithful in 'times of historical testing'.<sup>69</sup> Such times can include periods of explicit socio-political upheaval, such as the civil rights movement in the US.<sup>70</sup> Or they can include more subtle ideological contexts, such as economic systems that

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<sup>65</sup> McClendon, 'Do We Need', p. 292.

<sup>66</sup> Gill, *Fringes*, p. 11.

<sup>67</sup> An important idea in Stassen's ethical project is to offer a 'realistic' rather than 'idealistic' interpretation of lives and history. This is something which he equates with the Hebraic tradition of history telling, *Thicker*, pp. 3-15 and pp. 42-47.

<sup>68</sup> McClendon, 'Christian', p. 179.

<sup>69</sup> Stassen, *Thicker*, p. 14.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

foster injustice.<sup>71</sup> What McClendon calls the ‘precarious’ state of being a Christian is different in different historical contexts.<sup>72</sup> Writing in 1986, albeit with the American context in mind, he describes the contemporary situation as one in which, ‘The danger for Christianity in this world is not persecution but dissolution, the slow dissolving of distinctive Christianity into the surrounding culture’.<sup>73</sup> In general terms this perhaps best describes the historical context in which Gill proved to be faithful with his articulation of radical discipleship and mission expressed through the life of a community. Be this as it may, more detailed discussion is required to establish the backdrop to Gill’s activities.

On the one hand, Gill’s context was one of a particular type of evangelical conservatism. This was variously demonstrated in relation to matters of biblical interpretation, ecumenical relationships, the status of women in relation to leadership, and the nature of mission and evangelism. In mission there was an emphasis on evangelism directed towards the ‘conversion of individual souls’.<sup>74</sup> As to the success of this approach, Munro writing about Baptists in Melbourne states:

Growth and decline among Melbourne Baptists reflected broader demographic trends. Baptist churches were most successful when, in their respective areas, the housing development was saturated, and where, in the ensuing decade, there was settlement by young and middle-aged families.<sup>75</sup>

In turn, Baptists, in keeping with wider population shifts, were leaving often run-down inner-cities for middle class suburban areas.<sup>76</sup> All of this being the case, even with the best of intentions, it is possible to understand why investing in declining, aging inner-city congregations with expensive buildings to keep up was not always regarded as the primary concern, particularly when resources were short.<sup>77</sup> Here a theological perspective with a concern for effective witness, so understood, coalesced with a general cultural trend. Gill’s response to this cultural trend in relation to the Clifton Hill area of Melbourne was that he ‘believed that this would be the perfect location to establish a community church’.<sup>78</sup> One aspect of Gill’s context, therefore, one which he resisted, was a form of theological conservatism

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>72</sup> McClendon, ‘Do We Need’, p. 286.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>74</sup> Munro, ‘History’, p. 9.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 76.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., pp. 11-37 for a description of Baptist response to the inner city situation in Melbourne.

<sup>78</sup> Batstone, ‘Follower’, p. 24.

which embodied itself in particular mission practices in keeping with wider cultural trends.

On the other hand, Gill's historical context was one of considerable social change. Economically in Australia the 'Golden Age' of the 1960s and 1970s was over.<sup>79</sup> Traditional institutions, including the church, were facing challenges to their authority on issues of belief and morality.<sup>80</sup> One of the first discussions that Gill held with the students who challenged him to find a way for them to live out the faith he was describing, was on 'the irrelevancy of the church to the daily life of the students who lamented the fact that many of their Christian friends at university were on the point of leaving the church'.<sup>81</sup> This period saw the development of a secular counter-cultural movement.<sup>82</sup> It was also a time of the rise of a Christian counter-cultural movement and 'Athol felt part of a worldwide movement to renew society' with the actions of Philip and Daniel Berrigan and others in the US giving impetus to the movement in Australia.<sup>83</sup> In this context Gill, while appreciating the contributions of the Jesus People and the wider secular counter-cultural movement, offered a distinctive contextual response and practice based upon his biblical and theological convictions concerning the nature of discipleship and mission centered on the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>84</sup>

In the cultural context of largely conservative evangelical theology and practice in a society undergoing social change, Gill capitulated to neither situation. Rather, he responded and contributed to both in word and action. This response, as I will now demonstrate, emerged from convictions which, according to Stassen, are found in faithful incarnational disciples.

### **Thicker Jesus and Discipleship**

Stassen argues that one feature of those lives which demonstrate faithful incarnational discipleship is that they hold to a '*thick, historically embodied, realistic understanding of Jesus Christ* as revealing God's character and thus providing norms for guiding our lives'.<sup>85</sup> This conviction is clearly evident in Gill's teaching and practice, not least in his concept of what constitutes discipleship.

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<sup>79</sup> Munro, 'History', p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>81</sup> Pidwell, *Gentle*, p. 46.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 97-98.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-62.

<sup>85</sup> Stassen, *Thicker*, p. 16.

Writing about his faith Gill says:

One of my earliest recollections of life is of the morning my mother first took me to the Methodist Sunday school in the small country town where I was born. Dressed in brown shorts, shirt, and sandals, my face was aglow. I had been scrubbed clean the night before, ready to start out on a new adventure in life. We sat in two small chairs in a circle and listened to a story, and my feet were barely touching the floor.

The story that day was about four fishermen and a man called Jesus. What a day it was and what a story! After the story the teacher brought out some crayons and a picture to color. It showed two men in water up to their knees trying to catch fish with a net. And there was a man walking along the shore watching them. He was taller than they were and, for some reason or other, when he called to them, they dropped the net on the sandy beach and went off somewhere with him. I'm not sure if we were ever told where they went, but I didn't need to know. It would have been exciting wherever it was. The man with a long robe and a beard had captured another young boy's heart.<sup>86</sup>

This excerpt is worth quoting at length because for Gill discipleship was central to his understanding of what constituted being a Christian. It involved following Jesus on the road of life.

Long after Jesus had disappeared from the face of the earth, the picture of him moving through Palestine continued as a primary gospel image and the stories about the disciples, and others, were retold not as isolated encounters but as lifestyle norms for those who would respond positively to the call to follow Jesus in the life of faith.<sup>87</sup>

Such discipleship is 'radical' because it comes in the radical grace and love of God and evokes a radical response to the unconditional demands of Jesus on life and lifestyle.<sup>88</sup> Working out what this meant in practice, according to Gill, meant theological reflection on the Scriptures but with a priority given to the life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus as revealed in the gospels. This hermeneutic is stated again and again by Gill in his writings. So, for example, in his introduction to the book, *The Fringes of Freedom*, he writes concerning the unifying feature of the varied essays:

The centre point of our theological reflection, however, has remained constant as I have focused on the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. This has been for me 'the canon within the canon', the yardstick by which the material has been measured.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Gill, *Life*, p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> Gill, *Fringes*, p. 49.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 17-31.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

When seeking to apply biblical teaching to the subject of family, he states, ‘When any subject is to be considered from a distinctively Christian standpoint, priority must be given to the life and teaching, the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ’.<sup>90</sup> Or again, when talking about evangelism and mission but with wider implications: ‘The starting point for reflection on evangelism and mission and for all theological and ethical questions when viewed from their distinctively Christian perspective, is to be found in Jesus of Nazareth.’<sup>91</sup>

These are only selected examples of his consistent Christological hermeneutic for interpreting the Scriptures.<sup>92</sup> The goal of this hermeneutical approach was not simply knowledge, but practice.

His logic was simple, but it had profoundly disturbing implication: If Jesus is the human expression of God’s love and purpose for humanity, *his* instruction (in word and deed)—*not* the values, norms and assumptions of society should provide the church with its vision and direction.<sup>93</sup>

Following such a vision marked Gill’s own life and not simply his teaching. For this reason Neville highlights Gill’s ‘integrity’ as a ‘distinguishing mark of his teaching’, because he sought to live according to the teaching he gave.<sup>94</sup> For Gill, therefore, the Jesus of the gospels was the determining norm for faithful discipleship.

The above said, the way in which Gill derived his ‘*thick, historically embodied, realistic understanding of Jesus Christ*’ invites some consideration. Stassen does not discuss in detail any particular approach to Scripture in order to get this ‘thick’ biblical understanding. He is more concerned with the practical ethical outcome of the study of the Jesus narratives than the method adopted. As demonstrated above, Gill fulfils that criterion. Be this as it may, Gill’s approach is interesting. He comes to the Scriptures with a clear concern, related no doubt in part to his Baptist convictions with a concern to demonstrate the ‘biblical’ basis of the positions he is arguing. Much of his writings are detailed bible studies often covering in summary the Old and New Testaments, yet with the previously discussed focus on the centrality of Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup> He was, however, trained in and applied modern methods of studying the gospels which it can be argued are

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>92</sup> Neville, ‘Introduction’, p. xvi.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. xvii.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. xviii.

<sup>95</sup> This is quite evident in his previously mentioned article on ‘Human Rights’ and in the manuscript of ‘Poverty and the Poor in the Bible’, a previously unpublished piece of work published in Pidwell, *Gentle*, pp. 181-272.

designed to strip off layers rather than thicken.<sup>96</sup> In particular, Gill was interested in 'theological analysis', traditionally called 'redaction criticism', with an attendant concern for literary, socio-political, and canonical analysis.<sup>97</sup> For Gill this theological analysis involved identifying the theological interests of each of the authors as they applied the gospel message to context. This did not diminish the gospels, but helped demonstrate how the message of Jesus was a living tradition to be constantly reapplied.<sup>98</sup> This was not simply something of academic interest, but invited the ongoing application of the life and message of Jesus as congregations reflected on the four maps provided by the different evangelists.<sup>99</sup> To be sure, this type of analysis suggests some sort of original story and this raises question of its historicity. Gill is aware of this, and that lack of attention to this issue is a weakness of the theological approach.<sup>100</sup> Be this as it may, in his studies this is not the historical question he addresses. Rather, the '*thick, historically embodied, realistic understanding of Jesus Christ*' he offers is the Jesus portrayed by the evangelists in their various particular interpretations as they respond to their historical contexts. This said, in identifying that these are interpretations he is not inviting people to put faith in the faith of the early church, but in the living Jesus who stands behind these interpretations and beyond them but is realistically, as it were, brought to us through them.<sup>101</sup>

As an approach to the gospels as demonstrated in Gill's story, this is not one which everyone would find acceptable because it raises the question of the historicity of the events behind the interpretations without explicitly addressing it. On the other hand, for at least some who were looking for an alternative approach to the gospels, which recognised their differences but yet posited them as inspired and instructive for Christian living, it was an approach that proved inspirational and attractive. As previously stated, however, it is the fact that the approach brings individuals into an encounter with Jesus as portrayed in the gospel narratives with the outcome of particular ethical practice which means it accords with Stassen's criteria rather than the actual means of getting there.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Donald B. Kraybill, 'Foreword', *Life*, p. 7.

<sup>97</sup> Athol Gill, 'Contemporary study of the Gospels, Part 1: Theological Analysis', *St Mark's Review* 147 (Spring 1991), pp. 11-20. Apparently specific articles on literary, socio-political, and canonical analysis were planned but not written before his death.

<sup>98</sup> Gill, *Life*, pp. 15-21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

<sup>100</sup> Gill, 'Contemporary Study', p. 18.

<sup>101</sup> Gill, *Life*, p. 22. This is my interpretation of what Gill says there and of the approach he adopts in his various studies.

<sup>102</sup> This, of course, may for some raise a further question about the validity of Stassen's approach.

## Sovereignty of God

A second feature of the lives of faithful incarnational disciples as identified by Stassen is ‘a holistic understanding of the Lordship of Christ or sovereignty of God *throughout all of life and all of creation*’.<sup>103</sup> For Stassen this does not mean the heroes of the faith were those who responded to circumstances with a resigned believing fatalism. Rather, this conviction served as a motivation to action because they rejected ‘a two-kingdoms or body-soul or temporal-eternal dualism that blocks God’s guidance in Christ from applying to the secular realm’.<sup>104</sup>

This conviction concerning the Lordship of Christ throughout all of life is demonstrated clearly in Gill’s understanding of mission. In discussing this he begins as we should now expect with ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ and writes:

The central feature of Jesus’ teaching was that in him the kingly reign of God had begun to break into human history. With authority he declared that God will reign (Mark 1:14-15; Matthew 4:17) and he pointed to the fact that his reign was already breaking in as Satan was being defeated (Luke 11:20; 10:18) ‘the blind can see, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the gospel is preached to the poor’ (Matthew 11:5).<sup>105</sup>

For Gill, therefore, the starting point for mission is explicitly the coming liberating reign of God over all of life. In another place he brings an explicit socio-political dimension to his interpretation of the nature of Jesus’ mission:

The Bible takes seriously the existence of corporate evil and its destructive powers; its ability to enslave even entire nations...The Bible also takes seriously the liberating power of Jesus Christ, the Stronger One, who by the finger of God is able to defeat the demonic and inaugurate the kingly reign of God. The deliverance of which the Bible speaks is personal and corporate; it involves humanity in all its dimensions, the personal and the social, the religious and political.<sup>106</sup>

Consequently, to be called to discipleship is to be called to participate in this messianic mission.<sup>107</sup> This involves making known the liberating message of Jesus Christ which eschews the dichotomies that limit the sphere of God’s interests.

This good news of liberation in Jesus Christ encompasses the whole of life and the response of repentance and faith embraces the whole world. Evangelism,

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<sup>103</sup> Stassen, *Thicker*, p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>105</sup> Gill, *Fringes*, p. 153.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 136-138.



social action and political involvement are all integral parts of the community's mission in the world.<sup>108</sup>

This theology of mission explains Gill's belief that pursuing justice and peace are integral aspects of the gospel. It also demonstrates the conviction that the ways of God have significance for all aspects of life which, according to Stassen, is a feature of those who have proved themselves as faithful incarnational disciples.

### **Resisting Dominant Ideologies**

The third feature which Stassen identified as present in those characters who have proved themselves to be faithful disciples was that they issued 'a strong call for *repentance from captivity to ideologies* such as nationalism'.<sup>109</sup> Again, this theme is clear in the writing and life of Gill.

In his chapter, 'The Call to Radical Discipleship', Gill begins by referring to the work of Johann Baptist Metz and quotes some of Metz's questions about the nature of discipleship and repentance including, 'Are we Christians in this country really changing our hearts, or do we just believe in a change of heart and remain under the cloak of this belief in conversion basically unchanged?'<sup>110</sup> In contrast to this Gill writes, 'Jesus called for a dramatic response—a radical reorientation of life'.<sup>111</sup> This radical reorientation involved the 'surrender of the total personality to God'.<sup>112</sup> As such, it is not just a change of heart but a change in one's way of living.<sup>113</sup> This change requires 'obedience to the moral demands of the kingdom'.<sup>114</sup> These demands are to be met 'in specific acts of self-sacrifice in concrete situations'.<sup>115</sup> In describing the nature of this repentance in relation to other claims on people's lives he writes:

To join in the festival of the kingdom requires that we abandon our boats and leave our ledgers behind. We have to say good-bye to even the most sacred of customs and the most hallowed of laws. For the sake of Jesus Christ we must be prepared to risk being regarded as traitors to our nation, our class, even our religious traditions and affiliations.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>110</sup> Johann Baptist Metz, *The Emergent Church: The Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World*, cited Gill, *Fringes*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>111</sup> Gill, *Fringes*, p. 38.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 39, he is quoting here from Rene Padilla, 'Evangelism and the World', *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*, ed., J. D. Douglas (Minneapolis: World Wide Publications, 1975), p. 128.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

The concept of repentance as a necessary corollary to discipleship in the way of Jesus is, therefore, a very strong theme in Gill's writings.

It is with respect to the theme of repentance from other dominant ideologies that Gill's concern for community living can be discussed.<sup>117</sup> He strongly criticized the 'individualism' prevalent not simply in Australian society but encouraged by the emphasis of Protestant churches 'on privatized spirituality and individual decision making fuelled by the competitive spirit of consumerism'.<sup>118</sup> He blamed what he saw as 'excessive individualism' as creating an 'alienated society' which he saw as a source of social problems, including drug abuse and loneliness.<sup>119</sup> In response he argued that Christians needed to examine how the church could become again 'a community of people bound by the grace and love of God, supporting one another and embracing humanity in a mission of liberation and reconciliation'.<sup>120</sup> His own conviction as to how this could best be done was in the establishment of 'intentional Christian communities'.<sup>121</sup> For Gill, therefore, community could create a place for people to be 'human' in relationship over and against individualism and alienation.<sup>122</sup> Moreover, community was a place in which people called together by Jesus in his way could learn and practice the counter-cultural lifestyle of discipleship. This involved resisting the 'claims of material possessions', showing partiality to 'nobodies' in society rather than the affluent, renouncing 'traditional ideas of power and privilege, learning dependence upon God and accepting life as a gift from God'.<sup>123</sup> Viewed in this way, for Gill community living was a place where a number of dominant ideologies of society could be resisted and obedience practised. Indeed, in talking about the House of Freedom he claims precisely that the practice of community was necessary because the church at the time was too directly and uncritically linked to the culture in relation to the 'social, economic, and political system'.<sup>124</sup>

Gill challenged directly some dominant cultural ideologies and practices in his writings. These included unjust fiscal systems that favoured military interests and the rich and powerful, 'dehumanised materialism',

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<sup>117</sup> Discipleship, mission, and community are three key, inter-related motifs in Gill's theology. As with Stassen's criteria they belong together but are separated to allow detailed analysis.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> Gill writes of community, 'We need space in which we can learn to be human again', *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 41-46.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

‘competition and consumerism’.<sup>125</sup> He directly challenged the Australian treatment of Aboriginal people and prejudice against immigrants as well as the poor and marginalised in inner cities.<sup>126</sup>

In criticising and calling for repentance from dominant cultural ideologies that appeared contrary to the way of Jesus, Gill was prepared, as already indicated, to critique the church for its complicity in the culture on these matters. Discussing mission he writes:

The Lausanne Covenant rightly reminds us: ‘In issuing the gospel invitation we have no liberty to conceal the cost of discipleship. Jesus still calls all who would follow him to deny themselves, take up their crosses and identify themselves with his new community’. It will be interesting to see what will happen when the predominantly middle-class churches of the western world, with their basically middle-class evangelistic programmes, begin to call for a radical renunciation of the excessive individualism, the abuse of power and privilege, and thoroughgoing dependence on material possessions so dominant in our culture.<sup>127</sup>

On the other hand he was prepared to learn and dialogue with other secular counter-cultural groups, recognising common concerns and valid critique of the church.<sup>128</sup> Yet while learning and dialoguing with such counter-cultural groups, Gill says that followers of Jesus will want to assert ‘that their critique of western civilisation is not sufficiently thoroughgoing’, because it denies the significance of alienation from God which can only be rectified through the power of Jesus Christ.<sup>129</sup>

In Gill, therefore, we see a strong emphasis on repentance involving a renunciation of dominant cultural norms and practices. This call is based on a thoroughgoing application of his understanding of the nature of discipleship and mission in the way of Jesus Christ. Consequently, it is a call that he issued both to the wider culture including its own counter-culturists and to the Christian church when and where he felt it was implicated in complicity. In these ways his writings and actions demonstrate the presence of Stassen’s third feature of the writings and actions of those who in context proved to be incarnational disciples.

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., pp. 55 and 165.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., pp. 55-56.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., pp. 166-167.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., pp. 87 and 165-166.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

## **Conclusion**

Athol Gill was a prominent Australian Baptist theologian and activist. He was declared a ‘prophet’ by contemporaries for his teaching and actions. Further analysis demonstrates that in his life we can discern the three dominant convictions that are to be found in the lives of those whom Glen Stassen calls faithful incarnational disciples. His biography reveals this theology. In this sense his significance is not simply past and he is not simply gone. For he can be held up to the present as one of our best who sought in context to live faithfully as a follower of Jesus Christ and whose story in the retelling invites us to examine our own lives and faithfulness. If we follow Gill’s own emphasis at this point, our faithfulness will not be found in a slavish imitation of him. Rather it will be found in seeing his example as an attempt to reinterpret in context the way of Jesus and the disciples as recorded in the gospels with the invitation that we do likewise. Whether this qualifies him to be called a ‘saint’ I will leave to others to judge.

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## Book Review

Pavel Hošek, *A bohové se vracejí: Proměny náboženství v postmoderní době* [And gods are coming back: Metamorphoses of religion in postmodern times, in Czech]. Jihlava: Mlýn, 2012, 141 pages paperback, ISBN 978-80-86498-48-5.

In many different fields of contemporary humanities and social sciences, it has almost become a fashion to speak about the “return of the sacred”. Many sociologists of religion (such as Peter Berger and others), who only one or two generations ago spoke about the decline and/or gradual death of religious faith, have publicly recanted their stand and admitted that the so-called secularisation thesis has seriously blinded their eyes to the more and more obvious processes of re-emergence and re-vitalisation of religious faith and spirituality almost all over the world (including the most secularised societies of Europe) at least since the last third of the twentieth century.

This far-reaching re-evaluation of the vitality and importance of religion in the contemporary world provided the starting point for Dr Pavel Hošek’s monograph. In the first part of the book, based on sociological research the author briefly summarises the general, primarily stabilising and integrating functions of religion in traditional societies. In the following section, the so called “secularisation process” of the modern Western world is briefly discussed. The most influential explanatory theories of the secularisation process, its main causes, and key catalysts are described and analysed as well.

Against the conceptual background presented in the first part, the second part of the book focuses on the three most important avenues of the so-called “return of the sacred” in the contemporary world, particularly from the middle of the 1970’s on. Three phenomena are taken into consideration: the return of religion into public space and politics in general; the growth of religious fundamentalism (and/or fanaticism, radicalism, extremism etc.); and the “postmodern renaissance of spirituality” in secularised Western societies. In relation to some of the most important trends in contemporary global politics, several related issues are also discussed in the following chapters, such as religiously motivated violence and terrorism and the important similarities and differences between Europe and the USA in relation to the public role of religion and its cultural and political consequences.

One extensive chapter is dedicated to the particularities of Czech society and culture in relation to religion, since it is in many respects a very interesting and exceptional case. According to many scholars and especially

according to the data of sociological research, Czech society is probably one of the most secular societies in Europe. In this chapter, dealing with the unique features of Czech secularity, a short survey of Czech cultural, religious, and ecclesial history is presented and the most influential explanatory theories of the “Czech exception” are analysed and evaluated. The ecumenical breadth and sensitivity of these reflections are particularly worth mentioning.

The last two extensive chapters focus on the most typical characteristics of contemporary postmodern culture. The first one builds primarily on sociological research and cultural studies; the second builds on the observations and conclusions of the first and formulates a corresponding missiological perspective. Developing a kenotic-incarnational hermeneutics of contemporary culture, the author proposes a listening and dialogical approach to secular contemporaries, informed by solid and thorough knowledge of contemporary cultural expressions and their philosophical reflection. After a general missiological consideration, starting from an updated appropriation of H. Richard Niebuhr’s five models of relating Christ and culture, particular features of postmodern culture are discussed (its post-rationalist, post-ideological, post-individualist, post-traditionalist, post-optimist and post-materialist nature) and a corresponding missiological response suggested, particularly in response to the younger generation’s search for meaning, belonging, community, and spiritual fulfilment.

Hošek’s book is an interdisciplinary attempt to integrate the results of sociological research and the insights and observations of religious studies into an appropriate theological interpretation of secular (and post-secular) culture and to develop an adequate contextualised missiological methodology. The structure of the book is clear and well thought through. The narrative flow of the argument is organic, well-substantiated, and engaging. The carefully selected bibliography is both representative of the major trends discussed in the book and a resource for further intellectual probing of the hermeneutical and missiological questions set forth by the author.

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